ISSN 0268-487X

العنقاء

the PHOENIX

Number 18 December 2001

Compiled and distributed by Michael C Jennings (ABBA Co-ordinator) *for contributors to the Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia*

Introduction

The year 2001 has been a difficult one for me personally and in terms of progress on the atlas is concerned, this is due mainly to my job taking me to Kosovo for six months. During this time very little action was done on the project and indeed I had some difficulty in even keeping in touch with those on the ground in Arabia or getting mail and publications. I had thought that I would not get to Arabia at all during the year but I did manage a trip to Oman in November and December more as a wind-down from Kosovo than a serious ABBA Survey. Details of that Oman trip will appear in Phoenix 19.

Fortunately the usual flow of exciting breeding bird news has continued uninterrupted, including many records extending the range of individual species, new breeding birds for national lists and one really exciting new breeding bird for Arabia. This was the white-throated kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis* which was confirmed breeding in Kuwait this year and there is evidence that it had probably bred in previous years (Page 2). Also of great interest is the discovery of the first Arabian nests of the chukar *Alectoris chukar* in Musandam (Page 3) and the Gabar goshawk *Micronisus gabar* on the Tihama in south west Saudi Arabia (Page 6).

It is particularly heartening to see such a lot of exciting bird news coming from Kuwait this year. The Bird Monitoring and Protection Society (BMAPS) there was only formed in late 2000 but has already been the catalyst for a number of environmental and ornithological initiatives in the state and produced its first annual report (Page 14). At the other end of the Arabian Gulf prominent birders of Oman have got together to produce a first class guide to the birds of the country, geared to provide all the information that a visiting birdwatcher needs to get the most out of the country (Page 10). The book will undoubtedly encourage many more people to visit Oman and heighten interest in Arabian birds generally.

Michael Jennings

The white-throated kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis* was proved to breed in Arabia for the first time in 2001. (Page 2).

Sponsored and Published by the
National Commission for Wildlife
Conservation and Development (NCWCD)
P.O.Box 61681, Riyadh
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

الاشراف والنشر بواسطة
الهيئة الوطنية لحماية الحياة الفطرية
وانمائها.
ص ب ٦١٦٨١، الرياض،
المملكة العربية السعودية

White-throated Kingfisher - A New Breeding Species for Arabia

The white-throated kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis* breeds in Iraq, thence across Iran, the Indian subcontinent and continuously eastwards as far as the Philippines; westwards it is found in isolated pockets along the Mediterranean and Aegean coasts of Turkey and southwards across the Fertile Crescent as far west as Egypt. It is a regular winter visitor in Kuwait with 10-20 birds arriving in late September and typically staying until the end of March. A small number of birds have lingered into the summer months.

On 20 May 1999 JG found two fledgling white-throated kingfishers in a venerable *Tamarix* growing next to a well in an irrigated area known as Jahra gardens (or farms) just north of Kuwait City. Their plumage was blotchy and the bird he could see clearly had a dark grey bill with a conspicuous yellowish-white tip to both mandibles. A single unaged bird was seen the following day and on 27 May. JG observed an adult and two juveniles together in the same area. At the time of the observations and for some time subsequently the significance of these record was not recognised probably because distribution maps in most reference guides are not entirely accurate and the proximity of a known breeding population in Iraq. Independently KN found at least one juvenile on 31 August 1999 at the same site, noting that it was earlier than usual for an autumn arrival. Video footage taken at the time shows a bird with a brownish-grey bill with faint pale tip, dull plumage and blotchy underparts - almost certainly one of JG's birds

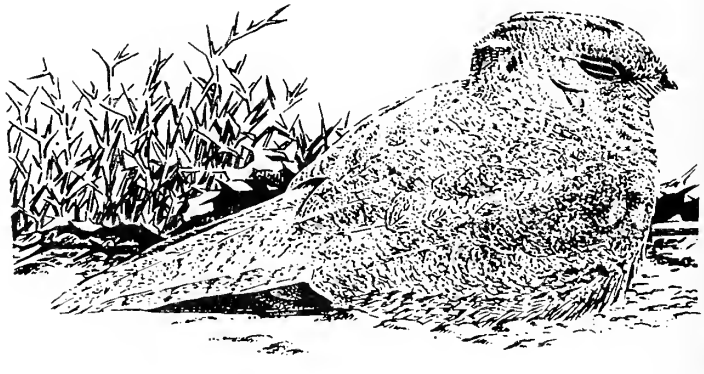
GG first learnt of JG's observations in April 2001 after publication of the BMAPS Annual Report 2000. Coincidentally a belated report of up to four (unaged) birds at the same site in May 2000 was received by GG at this time. The following Friday, 4 May 2001, he visited Jahra farms to discover whether irrefutable evidence of white-throated kingfishers breeding could be established. After locating the two adults that had been present all season, he followed their movements. Eventually one carrying a whitish grub or larva settled on a rubber-coated metal pipe at the site of a re-excavated well which is half surrounded by an earth bank. This is situated in the northwest corner of the farms adjacent to a mosque that lies behind a tree-shaded circular pool. After looking around briefly, the bird disappeared into a hole in the bank. GG photographed and then examined the hole, finding a tunnel of at least a metre in length sloping up at about 20 degrees. Multiple drag marks on the floor of this tunnel indicated continual recent use. Close by were two largely eroded and collapsed similar tunnels, which are evidence of breeding in the previous two years, and a partly excavated hole. Carefully descending the pile of debris below the nest site, he left the area to avoid disturbance.

Information about this discovery was circulated and a filming session with KN arranged for the following Friday to be preceded by a final reconnaissance of the site with PR on the day before. However, on arrival at the site on Thursday 10 May the nest chamber was found to be empty. Allowing for a minimum of 44 days for incubation and fledging, this means that the clutch of eggs was complete by 28 March at the latest, a date which is considerably earlier than in other parts of the species range. The cavity was found to be visibly eroded, sandy soil forming a light covering over the drag marks, indicating that the nest chamber had been deserted for at least 48 hours. A piece of a tough brown insect wing-case was found in the tunnel at this time. The tunnel was measured and found to be 7 - 8cm in diameter, the entrance c.2cm wider. The metal water pipe that had served as a look-out post, affording a clear view of the two footpaths giving access to the immediate nesting area, was found to bear many white and yellowish droppings.

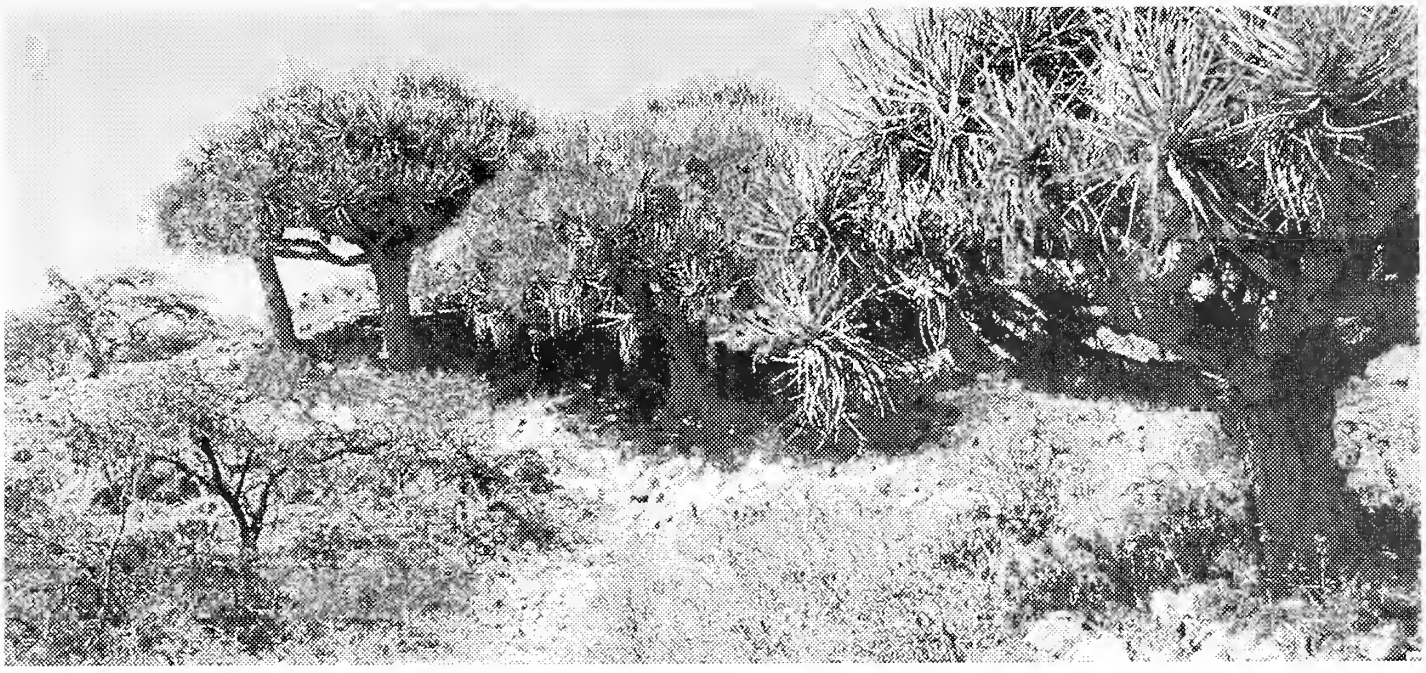
Shortly afterwards GG and PR observed both adults escorting two juveniles while loudly scolding a prowling cat. Then, while GG and PR were in conversation with farm owner Abdullah Al-Habashi (AH) and his Iranian farm worker Ali, one of the fledglings settled in a tree only four metres above them. All of the observers could plainly see the bird's small size - about two-thirds that of the adult - its relatively short dark bill with off-white tip, short tail and wings, and dowdy appearance. After c.15 seconds the bird flew off, not strongly, over the concrete wall to the neighbouring enclosed farm area whence prolonged loud calls emanated. The tree on which the fledgling had perched was about 100 metres from the nest hole and about the same distance, forming a triangle, from the large tree, now fallen, near the site of the old well where JG made his observation in May 1999. The pieces of evidence thus fitted together neatly.

The birds were filmed on 11 May by KN and GG at AH's farm. The adults proved easier to film than the fledglings which tended to keep well inside the canopy of the trees. However, GG and KN were able to establish that there were three juveniles on the wing. Each had the characteristic dark bill with an off-white tip (apparently the remains of the egg-tooth), a pale forehead, dowdy plumage, short wings and tail (showing obvious castellations) and each uttered a soft 'chik' contact call which was a highly distinctive note once learnt. Individuals maintained a continuous presence at Jahra Farms thereafter and this species is now regarded as a resident in Kuwait, with numbers boosted by winter immigrants.

Jeremy Gaskell, 68 Durham Road, London N2 9DS, England, (E-mail: impennis44@hotmail.com); Khalid Al-Nasrallah, PO Box 38509, Dhahyah, Kuwait, (E-mail: Khalid@kuwaitbirds.com); George Gregory KES, PO Box 8640, Salmiya 22057, Kuwait, (E-mail: ggoldie51@hotmail.com); Peter Robertson KES, PO Box 8640, Salmiya 22057, Kuwait, (E-mail: probertson1945@hotmail.com).



Egyptian nightjars *Caprimulgus aegyptius* were seen in June in Kuwait during 2001. Will it breed one day in Arabia? Page 8.



A hillside with many hundreds of large dracaena trees is an exceptional habitat in Arabia. Most might think this picture was taken in Socotra - it was not and the location of this site will surprise many (Page 13).

Chukar Nests in the Musandam Peninsula: A First Report from Arabia

A series of coincidences in February and March 2001 led to observation, examination and photographs of two chukar *Alectoris chukar* nests and eggs high in the Musandam Peninsula, the first such reports from Arabia. This information sheds light on the nesting habits and breeding schedule of this otherwise relatively conspicuous Musandam resident ground bird. The absence of earlier reports no doubt reflects the physical remoteness of the high Musandam and the effective concealment of chukar nests.

The chukar, is resident in south east Europe and much of the northern Middle East and south Asia according to Aspinall 1996, *(Status and Conservation of the Breeding Birds of the United Arab Emirates;* Hobby Publications, Liverpool and Dubai). In Arabia, it maintains self-sustaining populations at two extreme edges, in north west Saudi Arabia, near the border with Jordan, and in the mountains of the Musandam Peninsula (Jennings 1995, *An Interim Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia*, NCWCD, Riyadh). In the Musandam it is a common breeding resident according to Eriksen & Sargeant 2000 (*Oman Bird List, Edition 5*, OBRC, Muscat, Oman). It is regularly seen or heard there at elevations above about 500m, but there have been only intermittent sightings further south in the UAE and it is apparently absent altogether in the remainder of northern Oman.

Outside Arabia the chukar is known to be ground-nesting, using vegetation or rocks as cover. (Hollom P A D, Porter, R F, Christensen, S and Willis, I. 1988. *Birds of the Middle East and North Africa*, T & A D Poyser, London; Jennings 1995; Porter, R F, Christensen, S, and Schiermacker-Hansen, P. 1996, *Field Guide to the Birds of the Middle East*, T & A D Poyser, London). Its nest is said to be a shallow scrape lined with plant material, Jennings, 1995. However, despite its familiarity in the Musandam, the nest and eggs of the chukar had never been observed within Arabia and very little information exists on its breeding habits there. Simon Aspinall (*pers. comm.*) estimated that the breeding season in the Musandam extends from February to June. Jennings (1995) reports that very young chicks have been observed in April.

The First Nest

This was discovered by BC in mid-February while hiking with friends and contained nine eggs. The nest was located on a 1000 m plateau south of Khasab (WA29), Oman, overlooking the Arabian Gulf and adjacent to 1200 m 'Fine Peak', a landmark on British Admiralty charts. The nest was situated beside a plot of barley in a small cultivated area fenced to protect it from domestic and feral goats. The proprietor revealed the nest by pulling aside the foliage of a small shrub beside a low stone wall. The neat nest was well concealed under a canopy of a dense *Seriphidium herba-alba* (formerly *Artemisia herba-alba*), a thyme-smelling shrub common at high elevations in the Musandam.

BC described the eggs as light cream colour and a bit smaller than bantam hen size, just under 3.5cm long, but she was reluctant to disturb them. At this point the identity of the nest was not known but the proprietor gestured to indicate the distinctive black 'headdress' of the chukar and its whirring flight. BC imitated a chukar call which was agreed by the proprietor. Unfortunately BCs description also matched the eggs of the sand partridge *Ammoperdix heyi*, whose extensive Arabian range also includes the Musandam Peninsula. Chukar eggs have red-brown speckling like those of the red-legged partridge *Alectoris rufa* of western Europe. In either case the discovery was especially interesting as the nest of the sand partridge was also unrecorded from Arabia.

In order to resolve the issue BC returned to the nest site the next weekend with PLC, with camera, GPS, measuring and weighting equipment. However the eggs had gone and there was no trace of eggshells suggesting animal predation of, more likely, human harvesting. Descriptions were taken of the nest site and nest (see below). Field guide pictures of chukar and sand partridge were

shown to another resident nearby who was familiar with both species. It seemed from all the evidence that the most likely owner of the nest was the chukar.

The Second Nest

Three weeks later PLC joined GRF and Omani friends for a backpacking traverse in the high Musandam. Their starting point was a grassy field (abandoned cultivation) on a plateau at about 1450 m in the shadow of 2000 m Jebel Harim (WA28), the highest peak in the Musandam. One of the Omanis, Ali Suleiman of Khasab, had used the field for a picnic with friends just two days before when he had found the nest of a chukar (local Arabic *Safrad*) which he showed to PLC and GRF. There had been seven eggs when Ali had first seen it. Now, two afternoons later, there were nine, consistent with the egg-a-day habit of many game birds. The nest was within a clump of spiny *Convolvulus acanthocladus*, not especially well concealed once it had been noticed. The eggs were cream coloured and lightly speckled with red-brown. Looking at them, it was easy to understand why the light speckling had not caught BC's attention at the first nest. Photographs were taken of the nest and approximate measurements were made.

The immediate site was flat, scrub ground - rocks and scattered low shrubs with occasional taller shrubs and small almond trees. There was much picnic litter nearby. The nest was composed entirely of small sticks, with almost no other material besides a single breast feather. Ali said that mountain dwellers regularly ate chukar eggs and also that he had previously seen nests containing 13, 15 and even 20 eggs.

A pair of ground birds were observed near the nest at dawn the following morning, but fled before they could be positively identified. During the course of the weekend, PLC and GRF saw game birds on five other occasions, all chukar and all in pairs. The photos of the eggs were identified as typical of *Alectoris* species and so there was considered to be no doubt they belonged to the chukar.

Nest and Egg details

Because these two nests are the first reported for Arabia, details are set out in full below.

First Nest
Date: 16 February 2001
Site name: Sal Istam. Location: 26°05'03" N, 56°10'11" E. Elevation: 984 m.
Site description: Fenced cultivated plot on flat, open and grazed plateau. Nest on ground under dense *Seriphidium herba-alba* beside low stone wall, well concealed.
Nest description: Sub-circular, well constructed. Nest diameter (outside): 19-25 cm. Nest diameter (inside): 12 cm 'cup' (6 cm deep). Nest material: Grass stems & leaves (mainly *Cymbopogon* sp.), feathers (mainly down/breast feathers), palm fronds, *Seriphidium herba-alba* twigs & leaves, various other twigs, bark (*Zizyphus spina-cristi*), goat droppings, and bulb husks (possibly *Gynandiris sisyrinchium*).
Eggs: 9. Estimated size: < 3.5cm. Colour: Cream (speckling not reported).

Second Nest
Date: 9 March 2001
Site name: Plateau SW of Jebel Harim. Location: 25°58'01" N, 56°12'24" E. Elevation: 1468 m.
Site description: Flat, scrub ground with scattered clumps of shrubs, stones and occasional taller *Dodonaea viscosa* shrubs and small almond trees *Prunus arabicus*, all on a silty substrate.
Nest on ground within spiny clump of *Convolvulus acanthocladus*, moderately concealed.
Nest description: Circular, well constructed. Nest diameter (outside): estimated at 22.5 cm. Nest diameter (inside): estimated at 12.5-15.0 cm 'cup'. Nest material: Small twigs plus a few grass stems and feathers; no significant lining despite nearby availability of grass and assorted human litter.
Eggs: 9 (7 two days before). Approximate size: 3cm x 2cm. Colour: Cream with red-brown speckles.

Other 2001 breeding records

On 6 April BC observed a chukar family at about 1700 m on Jebel Qa'wah,1795m (WA28), comprising an adult and seven tiny tailless chicks on a narrow ridge of broken bedrock and sparse vegetation near the summit. Concerned for the well-being of the chicks BC and her party moved on and did not investigate for a nest. BC found a second chukar family a week later on rocky slopes near the summit of Jebel Rahabah, c.1500m (WA28). This consisted of an adult and at least two small chicks, slightly larger than those seen the week before.

Discussion

Together the above observations and others by the authors permit a tentative reconstruction of the breeding schedule for the Musandam chukar population, as follows:

(1) Male courtship display from no later than late January (observed by GRF on 26/01/96).
(2) Nest-building - unknown.
(3) Egg-laying from no later than early February through mid-March. Females lay one egg per day, up to nine or more. Breeding birds may remain paired during this period.
(4) Hatching from no later than early March to early April.

In an arid region such as the Musandam, the actual breeding schedule could well be influenced to a greater or lesser extent by the timing of rainfall. Rainfall is variable but the months of December through April are statistically the wettest in the UAE, with a peak in February and March (Bottomley 1991,Weather in the UAE. *Tribulus* 2.1; and Bottomley 1996, Recent Climate of Abu Dhabi in Osborne, P E (ed.), *Desert Ecology of Abu Dhabi*, Pisces Publications, Newbury, UK). The winter of 2000-2001 ended a three-year drought in the Musandam, with modest rain falling in early November and mid-December 2000 and mid-January 2001.

The above timetable agrees well with the estimate of Aspinall (1996) and is consistent with the contemporaneous observation on 31 March 2001 of a chukar parent and at least six young near Masafi (WA27), UAE, in the Hajar Mountains about 25 km south of the Musandam area (Dryden, *pers. comm.*). The latter report is noteworthy in its own right, because chukar are seen only exceptionally in the mountains to the south of the Musandam, although the significance of such sightings is confused by the occasional release of captive birds. Small, recently introduced and artificially supported populations also exist on a few near shore islands and coastal sites in western Abu Dhabi, 250-350 km to the SW (Aspinall 1996). In any case, to the south of the Musandam the most conspicuous mountain game bird by far is the sand partridge. The authors, all relatively well-travelled

observers in the Musandam, regard the sand partridge as rare there, and it is not unreasonable to suggest that the presence of the chukar may contribute to this. The nature of the chukar/sand partridge relationship is potentially instructive in helping to resolve the question whether the chukar population in the Musandam is native or introduced. The high Musandam is recognized as a refugium for a number of locally common plants and animals (including land snails, scorpions and butterflies) having Iranian affinities. They are montane relicts of a more temperate Arabian climate. The Musandam chukar population fits this pattern and has been acknowledged as a possible montane relict, but evidence also exists for possible human introduction as long ago as the 16th Century AD (Aspinall 1996). In either case it appears that the chukar has so far been unsuccessful in maintaining or expanding its range, unassisted by man, outside its Musandam stronghold.

Peter L. Cunningham, PO Box 17258, Al Ain, UAE, (e-mail:plc@emirates.net.ae); Gary R. Feulner, PO Box 31045, Dubai, UAE, (e-mail: grfeulner@shuaacapital.com); Barbara Couldrey, PO Box 4793, Ras al Khaimah, UAE, (e-mail: barbara.couldrey@hct.ac.ae).

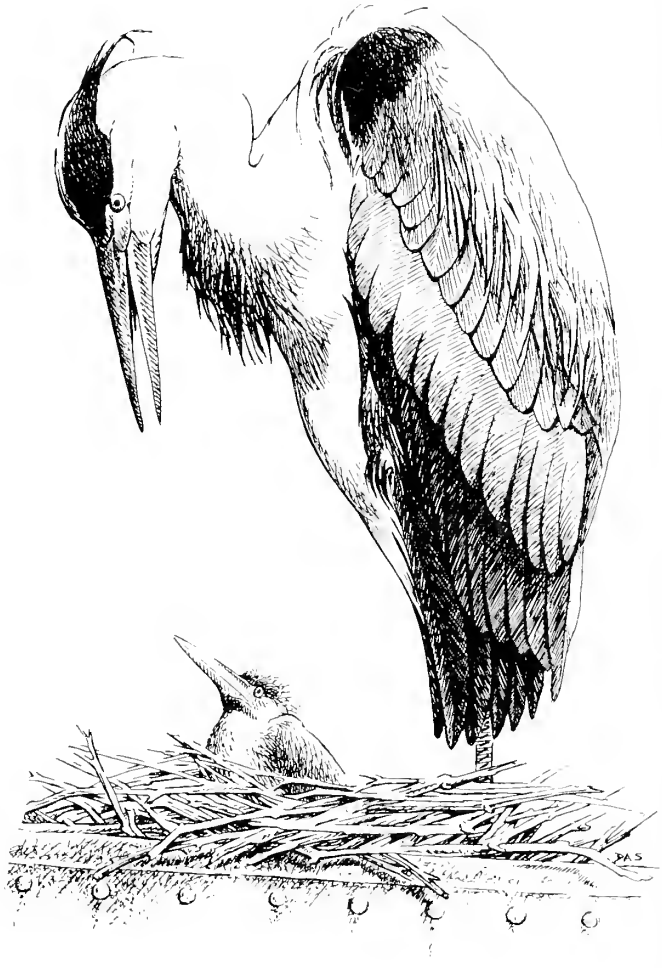
New records of Herons nesting in Kuwait

During 2001 both the grey and western reef herons (*Ardea cinerea* and *Egretta gularis)* were found breeding again in Kuwait after a gap of several decades.

In May 1906 grey heron were recorded as breeding on Warba Island (OA36) and were also breeding on that island on 19 May 1921 when several nests had 3-4 eggs. They were also nesting on Bubiyan island (OA36) on 21 May 1921, 30 May 1922 and 1 April 1923 in association with a colony of western reef herons on a ridge covered with salt bushes. On that last occasion the nests were built on bushes and on the ground (Ticehurst, Cox and Cheeseman 1926; *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 31:91-119). Previous records of western reef heron nesting in Kuwait include one on a breeding colony on Warba island 30 May 1906 (Ticehurst, Cox and Cheeseman, 1926) and on Kubbar island (OB34) 24 April 1921 when there were 6-8 nests, with 3-4 eggs in each, constructed of twigs placed on masses of weeds about 0.5 m high (Ticehurst, Cox and Cheeseman 1925; ; *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 30(4):725-733). The next year on 18 April 1922, 25 nests, most with eggs, were found built on salt bush on Bubiyan island (Ticehurst, Cox and Cheeseman, 1926). The next nest reported was on 9 May 1942 when there were four nests with one egg and one nest with three eggs on Kubbar Island (Ahmadi Nat. Hist and Filed Studies Group 1975; Unpublished Report).

These species were found breeding again in Kuwait in March 2001. On 16 March KN was observing from the western shore near Hujaijah village (OA36) and saw several adult grey herons landing on a wrecked ship lying in the Bubiyan channel which separates the mainland of Kuwait from Bubiyan island. He organised a visit on 30 March to this ship to investigate whether these birds were visiting nests.

During the visit KN, MSA and AF, were accompanied by an NCO from the Kuwait coastguard. They approached the wreck in a small boat and as they did so a number of grey and western reef herons (both grey and white phases of the latter) flew off from the deck fittings. On boarding the ship, whose main deck was just submerged at the high tide, they found nests of two different sizes both types containing eggs and pulli. There were nine nests of the larger size, which were assumed to belong to grey heron, these contained about 20 eggs and pulli. These larger nests were mostly lower down on the metal deck fittings. There were four nests of the smaller size which were assumed to belong to the western reef heron and these held about ten eggs and pulli. These nests were mostly higher up on the metal deck fittings and one was on top of a metal pulley block with four metal pulley ropes on each side. All the nests of both sizes were made of twigs and the eggs were pale blue, most of them were partly covered with a pale brown dry muddy deposit. The nests, eggs and pulli were filmed and photographed.



After leaving the ship the small boat stopped about 100m from the wreck so that the adults could be observed. After a short while both adult grey and western reef herons flew back to the ship and settled on the nests.

There are a number of other wrecked ships lying offshore in Kuwait territorial waters. In future years they will be monitored for breeding birds.

Khalid Al Nasrallah, P O Box 38509, Dhahyah, Kuwait, (Khalid@kuwaitbirds.com); Mahhond Shihab al Ahmed, P O Box 23193, SAFAT, 13092, Kuwait, (Khalid@kuwaitbirds.com); Abdullah Al Fadhel, P O Box 30, Surra Kuwait, (info@kuwaitbirds.com).

Breeding Birds of Western Saudi Arabia

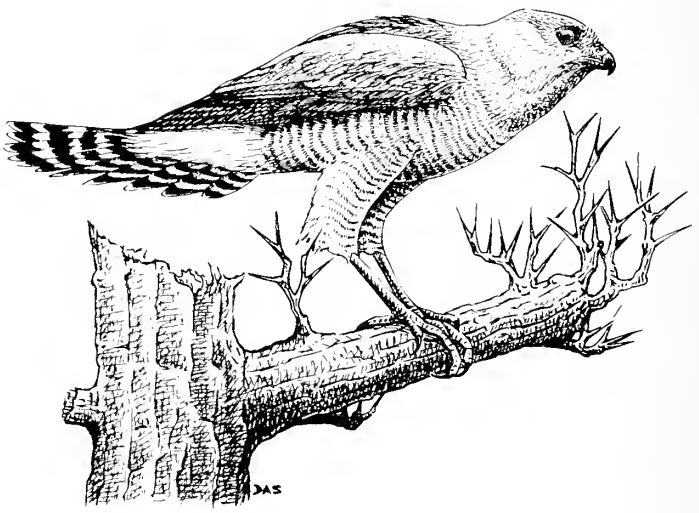
Following our successful trip in June 2000 (*Phoenix* 17:4-5), Jeffory Coburn, Bernard Pleasance, Tom Quittenden and I spent 3 weeks in Western Saudi Arabia in Spring 2001. Our purpose was to study those breeding species where there are distinct gaps in information.

We flew to Jeddah on 21 March and stayed for the first few days at the National Wildlife Research Centre near Taif. Here we spent time with Abdulrahman Khoja, Patrick Paillat, and Dr Jacky Judas. We saw about 20 hypocolius *Hypocolius ampelinus* with them. As well as finding many nests of commoner species at the centre, we found a small colony of little swifts *Apus affinus* in a cave, a new breeding record for the centre. Patrick took us to an area near Jarabah on the escarpment south of Taif where several pairs of fan-tailed ravens *Corvus rhipidurus* were nesting on roadside cliffs. We managed to reach one of these and were able to photograph the nestlings which had not previously been described.

Dr Mohammed Shobrak, also of NWRC, joined us at Taif and we spent the rest of the trip together. We visited the Mahazat-as-Sayd reserve (HB21-IA21), where Mohammed is studying the many pairs of lappet-faced vultures *Torgos tracheliotos* that breed there. Here we also saw the nest of houbara bustard *Chlamydotis undulata* and we found many nests of lark species, including Dunns lark *Eremalauda dunni*.

We drove south from Taif through hailstones and heavy rain to the small mountain town of Tanumah (IA14), about 120 kilometres north of Abha. We spent the next few days here, staying in the hotel which is built on the edge of a precipice overlooking the escarpment. One night at least two mountain nightjars *Caprimulgus poliocephalus* were flying and calling just below our rooms and, another night, a pair of spotted eagle owls *Bubo africanus* landed in the hotel car park. We found nests containing previously undescribed nestlings of several species including South Arabian wheatear *Oenanthe lugentoides*, red-breasted wheatear *Oenanthe bottae*, and brown-woodland warbler *Phylloscopus umbrovirens*. The breeding season for this latter species clearly starts much earlier, by about two months, than was previously known, because we saw both flying young and nestlings in late March. Arabian woodpeckers *Dendrocopus dorae* were seen entering a rather old nest hole but examination with an endoscope a few days later proved they were not yet nesting. Other records of interest included barbary falcons *Falco pelegrinoides* breeding on a massive cliff face, and an old disused tree nest of a hamerkop *Scopus umbretta* at 2500 m above sea level.

We spent 1 April near the Red Sea coastal town of Al Qunfudah (HA15) , where Abdulrahman arranged for the coast guards to take us to the island known as Umm-al-Qamari (HA14) which is translated as the mother of doves. Hundreds of pairs of African collared doves *Streptopelia roseogrisea* were in the early stages of nesting in low bushes. Also a ground nest of osprey *Pandion haliaetus* contained almost fully feathered young. We visited smaller islands nearby where 28 nests of spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*, and two nests of western reef heron *Egretta gularis* all contained eggs. Caspian terns *Sterna caspia* (one pair) were alarm-calling on territory but not yet nesting. A few days were spent at Wadi Jizan (IB10), near Abu Arish on the Tihama plain close to the Yemen Border. The highlight of our visit here was a nest of Gabar goshawk *Micronisus gabar* on 2 April - this was the first nest of this species found in Arabia. It contained three eggs. The nest was 7m above ground level in a tamarind tree *Tamarinda indicus*, in a partly cultivated dry woodland area. The nest was a shallow cup, made of small twigs and lined with finer twigs, rootlets, paper, grasses and tissue paper; extremely small relative to the size of the adult bird (diameter 26 cm; depth 20 cm). Nests in Africa often contain live spiders' webs but there was no trace on this one. The eggs were white and averaged 39.6 x 30.7 mm, slightly smaller than averages reported from Africa (41 x 31.5 mm). Mohammed was able to re-visit this nest in late April and took photographs of the young.



The first Arabian nest of the Gabar goshawk *Micronisus gabar* was found on the Tihama in 2001.

As in 2000, Abdim's storks *Ciconia abdimii* were breeding high on a telecommunications tower at the town of Asad al Masarha (IB10) ; on 2 April this nest contained four eggs. Two pairs of ring-necked parakeets *Psittacula krameri* were nesting in nearby holes in the structure and a nest of brown-necked raven *Corvus ruficollis* at the top, contained young. Two further pairs of Abdim's stork were breeding on a radio mast in the nearby town of Samta. Other interesting nests in the Abu Arish area included African palm swift *Cypsiurus parvus*, Nile Valley sunbird *Anthreptes metallicus*; and we saw recently fledged young of white-browed coucal *Centropus superciliosus*.

The last few days of our trip were spent at NWRC where we searched unsuccessfully for a nest of sand partridge *Ammoperdix heyi*. We saw a fledging Arabian warbler *Sylvia leucomelaena* on 6 April, and found nests of blackstart *Cercomela melanura* and desert lark *Ammomanes deserti*.

During our trip we were able to make complete new descriptions of four nestlings, added further details to the existing descriptions of several others and discovered many details on other aspects of breeding biology.

Our thanks are especially due to the staff of NWRC (mentioned above) and also to Professor Dr A. Abuzinada of NCWCD for granting permission for our trip.

Peter Castell, 19 Berry Drive, Great Sutton, Ellesmere Port, Cheshire, CH66 4JJ, UK. Email: pcastell@fsbdial.co.uk

Colonial breeding of Spanish Sparrow in Kuwait

The National Park in Kuwait (about 320 km^2), whieh ineludes about half of Jal az-Zour (Zour Hills) and nearby wadi systems and flat coastal areas (NB36), was fenced effeetively in late 2000 and from that time grazing, eamping, shooting and unauthorised entry were prohibited. This allowed the regeneration of vegetation during the period, winter of 2000 to spring 2001, when Kuwait saw above average rainfall. The provision of a drinking pool in the park combined with the inereased rainfall allowed an increase in plant life and a source of fresh water for wildlife in the park.

In the north western seetor of the park stands a solitary old acacia tree, partly fallen over but still living and blossoming despite damage eaused during the invasion. This is known as Kuwait's National Tree. About 1 km north of the tree is the drinking pool and about the same distanee west is a loeation ealled Tulha (NB36) which has a group of about 50 aeacia, *Zizyphus* and *Prosopis* trees. Most of the surrounding area is covered in low shrubs and herbs.

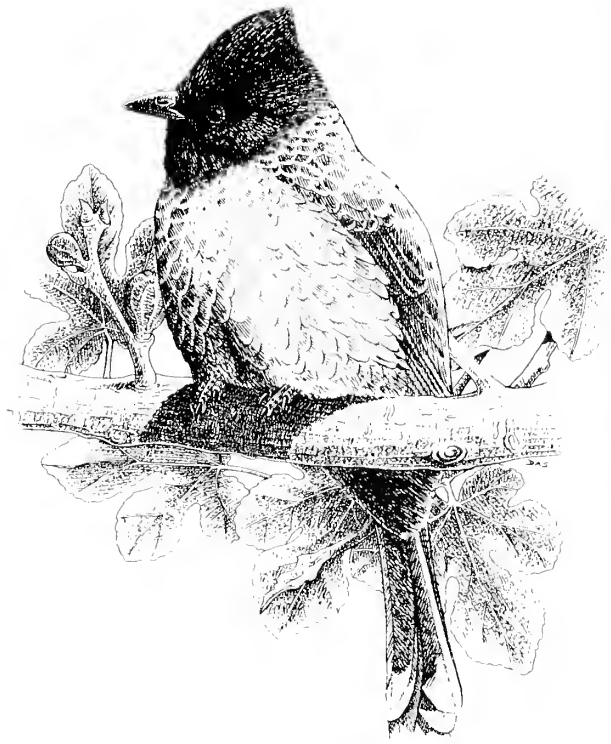
In February 2001 MJ and FM found a large group of Spanish sparrows *Passer hispaniolensis* building nests in the National Tree and a larger group of house sparrows *P. domesticus* mixed with a few Spanish sparrows doing the same at Tulha. Eventually about 60 nests of Spanish sparrow were built in the National Tree about, 150 house sparrow nests at Tulha, plus ten nests of mixed pairs (mostly male Spanish with female house) in with the house sparrows.

About 200 young Spanish sparrows, 500 house sparrows and 30 hybrids are estimated to have fledged. The pulli Spanish sparrows had obvious large bright yellow bills, the hybrids somewhat less so and the house sparrows mueh less so. The pulli Spanish sparrows were often fed quite large insects such as grasshoppers by the parents; such big food items were not observed to be provided by the house sparrow and mixed parents. When the juvenile
Spanish sparrows could fly they were escorted by their parents to the drinking pool several times a day. The house sparrows and hybrids also did this.

The entire breeding cycle finished abruptly and all adults and juveniles (exeept for some house sparrows at Tulha) had left the National Park by 27 April, presumably towards the north. On 17 May George Gregory found an adult male Spanish sparrow and five juveniles at a farm at Abdali (NB37) but it is not known if they were from the park.

This is the first time that detailed observations have been made on the colonial breeding of Spanish sparrow in Kuwait. Although birds have been observed on nests on several oeeasions before, this is the first time that pulli Spanish and hybrid sparrows have been seen in Kuwait. The colony was extensively shown on national television and publicised in national
newspapers.

Mishal Al-Jeriwi, KEPS, P O Box 1896, Safat, 13019, Kuwait, (mishal@kuwaitbirds.com); Fahad Al-Mansori, KEPS, P.O. Box 1896, Safat, 13019, Kuwait, (info@kuwaitbirds.com).



The red-vented bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer*, an exotic species which continues to spread through Arabia. One was present at Dharan (QA29) 7 January 2001 (Ian Phillip).

Attempts to Eradicate the House Crow on Socotra

The following notes are an edited extract of a report on Socotra birds by Omar Al Saghier.

The house crow *Corvus splendens* was first introduced to Socotra in late 1996 or early 1997, when a ship brought a pair from Aden. The birds were thought to be nesting on board. They left the ship at Hadibu port and shortly after were noted in the nearby Wadi Arhino, nesting in a date palm plantation. They have remained in the vicinity of Hadibu ever sinee. In November 1997, I counted six birds over Hadibu but since then the number has steadily inereased to reach 26 birds in May 1999.

This range extension to Socotra was viewed with concern. Introdueed house crows elsewhere in the region, especially in Aden and the Red Sea coast, have shown an ability to quickly multiply to pest status and have a devastating impaet on other birds, livestock and human activities. The danger posed by this alien species to the relatively small populations of several endemic species was identified at the outset. There was a universal support of the Government and from environmental bodies that attempts should be made to eradicate it in Soeotra. The following is a catalogue of the eradication attempts so far.

Larsen traps: The first attempt at eradication started in June 1999. Two Larsen traps were sent out by BirdLife International. The Larsen traps were use for a period of one week baited with eggs and restaurant waste. This attempt failed due to the high level of interference from goats and Egyptian vultures *Neophron percnopterus* which ate the food in the traps also the curiosity of people looking at the traps scared the crows away.

The Socotra cisticola *Cisticola haesitatus* is one of the endemic birds of the island which may be threatened if the house crow became established.

Shooting: After the failure of the Larsen traps it was thought that because of crows tended to stay in one place shooting might prove effective. In collaboration with the Army, five trained military marksmen were sent to Hadibu to shoot the crows. House crows are known from other eradication campaigns to be very quick to realise they are a target. It was unfortunate that the shooting attempt in June corresponded with the monsoon period when high winds presented difficult shots at the birds as they sat in the waiving palms. Consequently missed shots meant that the crows became very shy of gunmen. Shooting quickly became ineffective and was stopped.

Mist nets: A mist net was used one afternoon but this was also ineffective due to the presence of vultures and even when the vultures were not present (in the late afternoon) it was not possible to get the nets high enough to intercept the crows as they moved between the palms.

Biological control: During June 1999 nests were surveyed. Empty nests were
left untouched so that the birds would lay eggs. Nests with clutches were left unharmed so that the crows could continue incubation and raise young. The nests with young chicks were assessed and if the young were close to fledging then they were destroyed. During June 1999, 11 chicks were destroyed and constant monitoring by a local inhabitant adept at climbing palms, continued. Between June 1999 and February 2000 that person destroyed 15 chicks in their nests before fledging. This method has been of some success as by the end of February 2000 it was evident that the number of adult crows was not increasing and only 17 adult birds were seen over Hadibu.

Ladder trap: This project is not yet complete. A ladder trap 2m wide, 3m long and 2m high, with a 1m ladder has been set in a place where there were few disturbances. Various food items will be deposited in it to make it a constant feeding site for the crows and allow them to become accustomed to it. The ladder trap will be monitored daily and crow numbers attending will be noted. Upon confirmation of satisfactory numbers of crows visiting the ladder trap, the entrances to the trap will be reduced so that eventually they can only enter through the ladder holes which do not allow exit.

Omar Al Saghier (Email: omarbio@y.net.ye).

Recent Breeding Data from Kuwait

Members of the Bird Monitoring and Protection Society (BMAPS) have been active in collecting data and have generally increased the observer coverage of Kuwait since the formation of this group in November 2000.

The following notable records of breeding and potentially breeding birds are reported including some from earlier years not previously recorded. See other reports in this *Phoenix* for additional breeding species notes. Records are for 2001 unless otherwise shown. The observers are listed at the end

Herons. An adult female little bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*, a pair of night herons *Nycticorax nycticorax* and six adult squacco herons *Ardeola ralloides* were flushed from reedbeds by shooting at Jahra East outfall (NB35) on 1 June when breeding might be expected.

Greater sand plover *Charadrius leschenaultii*. Bred again at Sabah al Salem (OA35) with courtship and injury feigning observed on 16 March and 2 flightless chicks on 12 May.

White-winged black tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*. Bred again Jahra East outfall. On 25 May four adults (2 on nests) and 2 second year birds were present and three days later there were three recently fledged juveniles, each with a pair of adults. An adult and a juvenile were shot on 1 June.

Spotted and pin-tailed sandgrouse *Pterocles senegallus* and *P. alchata*. Approximately 250 pairs each of these sandgrouse bred in the demilitarised zone (NA37) each year from 1994 to 2000. Breeding commenced in February, eggs and young were seen but all birds left in July. In the evening or night birds collected water from irrigation systems at Abdali Farms (NB37). In 2001 restrictions were lifted on access to the DMZ and human activities ended breeding of these species.

Namaqua dove *Oena capensis*. More records, including a male at Salaibikhat Bay (NB35) 26 March, a male and two females at Qaisat gardens (NB35) 26 March, a male at Jebel Benayeh (OA34) 30 March, a pair at Salah al Salem 30 April and a male Wafra farms (OA34) 31 May.

Eagle owl *Bubo bubo*. Single birds at Wadi Ar Rimam in the National Park (NB36) 16 Mar and 7 Jun and used nest and pellets Jal Az Zor (NB36) 6 April.

Egyptian nightjar *Caprimulgus aegyptius*. Two flushed from the ground at night on 7 Jun in the National Park . This species has not bred in Arabia to date but the protection of the park now offers against grazing, shooting and access, the provision of a drinking pool with the improvements in plant and animal life may encourage the species to breed one day.

Black-crowned finch lark *Eremopterix nigriceps*. Small colony breeding at a large outdoor palm nursery (OA34) with plants about half metre tall being drip fed.

Short-toed lark *Calandrella brachydactyla*. Two recently fledged juveniles with two adults near Jahra east outfall 28 May and there were three other recently fledged juveniles with one adult at the National Park drinking pool, 7 June.

Lesser short-toed lark *Calandrella rufescens*. Recently fledged juvenile seen at the drinking pool at the National Park.

Swallow *Hirundo rustica*. Two remained near building at Jahra Pools (NB35) until at least 7 June.

Rufous bush chat *Cercotrichas galactotes*. Eight pairs at Abdali 17 May, two of which were accompanying a single fledgling each.

Graceful warbler *Prinia gracilis*. Has now spread to Failaka island (OA35) and down the south east coast from Sabah al Salem to near Zour (OA34)

Moustached, reed and Basra reed warblers *Acrocephalus melanopogon, scirpaceus* and *griseldis*. All singing at reedbeds near Doha south Nature reserve (NB35) and Jahra from March to June but no definite proof of breeding.

Olivaceous warbler *Hippolais pallida*. Three pairs visiting possible nesting sites inside open ended greenhouses full of cucumbers at Abdali Farms 17 May

Golden oriole *Oriolus oriolus*. Pair lingered at Jahra farms from 4-11 May but showed no sign of breeding.

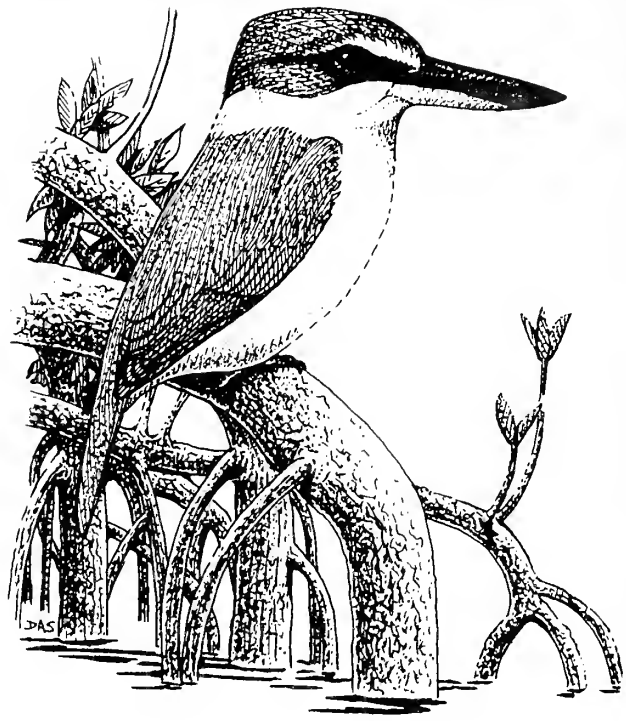
Brown necked raven *Corvus ruficollis*. One found dead near Bubiyan bridge (NB35) a new area, 3 May.

Bank mynah *Acridotheres ginginianus*. Large colony breeding in wells at Jahra farms a new breeding bird for Kuwait and the Western Palearctic region.

Yellow-throated sparrow *Petronia xanthocollis*. Two recently fledged juveniles photographed at Jahra pool May 1999 predates last years breeding record. On 4 May 01, two recently fledged juveniles were found at Jahra farms with two adults . One pair bred again at Zour being seen at a nest on 17 May.

This report was compiled from the records of Suad al Ahmadi , Mahmoud Shihab al Ahmed , Abdullah Al Fadhel, Mishal al Jeriwi, Fahad al Mansori, Khalid al-Nasrallah, Shaika Amthal Al Sabah, Abdulmohsen Al Suraye'a, Mark Chichester, George Gregory, Gunhild Ostewro, Eisa Ramada , Peter Robertson, Gavin Rowlands and Ole and Solveig Schroder

George Gregory KES P O Box 8640, Salmiya 22057 Kuwait, (Email: ggoldie51@hotmail.com).



Calls coming from inside a large knot hole, about 10 cm wide, at head height in a mangrove tree at Khor Kalba (WA27), UAE, 13 July 2001 were probably young white-collared kingfishers *Halcyon chloris*. (Colin Richardson).

New Books

Phoenix aims to provide details of all new publications which are relevant to the study of birds and wildlife in Arabia, or to the Arabian/Middle Eastern environment generally. Most titles mentioned are available in good book shops in Arabia, Europe and North America. Others are on restricted distribution or privately published and readers wishing to obtain copies should contact the author, publisher or distributor mentioned. When ordering through a library or agent quote the ISBN or ISSN number if given. The prices shown against the following titles (Pages 10-11) are published prices, but may include post and packaging. Recommendations made about books are based on the standard of treatment of the subject, format and quality of preparation. A recommendation does not necessarily mean good value for money. Readers are asked to provide details of other new, relevant titles not mentioned in this survey.

ORDER FORM FOR *PHOENIX* SUBSCRIPTION AND ABBA SALES ITEMS

1. ***Phoenix* Subscription** Please enrol me for the next five issues of *Phoenix* (Nos 19 - 23) at a total cost of £20/€33 (See notes over the page).	**Sum enclosed** .....
2. ***Phoenix* back issues** (Nos. 1-17) £2/€4 each. (State issues required)	.....
3. ***Phoenix***, set of issues 1-17, for £25/€40.	.....
(Cut out or photocopy and send to address overleaf) **TOTAL ENCLOSED**	

Name and address for despatch of sales items: .....

.....

.....

Birdwatchers Guide to Oman by H & J Eriksen and P & D Sargeant (2001)

This comprehensive guide on where, when and how to see birds in Oman is just what both resident and visiting birders to the Sultanate need to get the most out of their birding. This guide has everything one needs to plan and enjoy a successful trip to the country. The first chapter deals with all those practical issues and facts that one needs to know about the country when planning a trip and special considerations about how to bird there. This section includes among other issues getting there, visas, car hire, accommodation, camping, language, people, customs, climate and health. As an introduction to the 470 odd species that have now been recorded from the country there follows an annual bird calendar which provides an overview of what can be seen where in each month. The most important section of the book is the sites guide comprising of nearly 160 pages of where to watch birds in Oman and how to find the sites and what birds are found at each. Birders visiting Oman are spoilt for choice, there are enough sites within daily travel of the capital to fill a fortnight! The site guide provides information on over 60 good sites in 10 regions of Oman. Sites are categorised with a 1-3 star rating - three stars sites are those that any birder should not miss. Sites are also categorised as to whether they can be reached by 2 or 4 WD vehicles. This is an important point for those visiting the country who may not appreciate that some sites are many kilometres off the beaten track For each site there is a clear schematic diagram map of how to find the site with format symbols to indicate various features of habitat, roads, topography, petrol stations (very important) and villages. These diagrams have been tested in the field by the reviewer and found to be very accurate. However nothing stays the same in Arabia for long and later visitors will find fences in the way or roads passing in a different direction in future. For each region there is a listing of the common resident species and the migrants and visitors occurring there. For each site the text provides a listing of the key birds for which the site is well known and there is then details of habitat and issues relating to the site, such as restrictions on access and of course all those birds that could turn up there at various times of the year. There are also notes on accommodation or if camping is recommended to give yourself enough time when visiting the site. Part of the sites guide is a section on all the species that have been recorded at each and their status, presented in tabular. Several sites have over 200 species recorded at them but the record is held by the village of Hilf on the northern part of Masirah island noted for its rare migrants with a total of 312 species on its list. (The species count for this site is slightly biassed as it has been well watched over many years). The sites guide sections is followed by a section called 'bird finder' - its basically a systematic checklist but allows the reader to see at a glance where and when a particular species is likely to be seen. The list includes a couple of dozen escapes. This part cross refers to the sites guide for easy reference. The book is complete with a gazetteer showing the co-ordinates of sites and places (allows one to finds sites with the help of a GPS which is important in remote areas) and there are indexes to birds and sites. At the back of the book there is a complete checklist (with a box to tick), a reference list and selected bibliography. This excellent publication is illustrated with some 64 maps/diagrams, 92 colour photos by the Eriksen's and line drawings. No one can visit Oman without this book. Highly recommended.

Soft laminated covers (portrait 16 X 23 cm 258 pages. Available from the Natural History Book Service (http://www.nhbs.co.uk/) Price £20 (about 33). Published by Al Roya Publishing, PO Box 343, Muscat, Oman. Sponsored by the Oman International Bank.

Wild Yemen - A guide to ecotourism sites around Sana'a (2001)

This useful 24 page (A5 size) booklet has been prepared and distributed by *the Yemen Times,* the English language newspaper of Yemen. The book describes how to get to some 30 or so sites within three hours of Sana'a , grouped into 12 main routes. Introductory paragraphs deal with the diversity of Yemen's wildlife, useful addresses and ecotourism and at the end there is a list of books on Yemen's environment and wildlife. The guide is not especially about birding in Yemen but it is about the best natural habitats and usually that means good bird sites. For each site or group of sites there are notes of the highlights to be found, mammals, reptiles, prominent plants and of course birds. How to find the site is dealt with by small maps and clear directions, and a description of the habit and topography and other attractions to be found at the site, including hiking opportunities. Illustrated with plenty of photos of sites and wildlife.

Available from David Stanton, P O Box 2002, Sana'a, Yemen. (Email: yos@y.net.ye) , Price $3 includes post and packing.

Notes to *Phoenix* Subscriptions and ABBA sales items

1. All items are post free. If airmail is desired please add 25% to total cost.

2. If payment is preferred in a foreign currency please send bank notes (at current rate of exchange). Unfortunately bank charges on foreign currency cheques are now so exorbitant as to make payment by foreign cheque unrealistic for small sums.

3. Subscribers to *Phoenix* will receive a personal reminder when their next subscription is due.

4. Cheques are to be made payable to "M C Jennings" or "ABBA" (or credit Giro Account No 50 851 7206). Orders and cheques to be sent to:

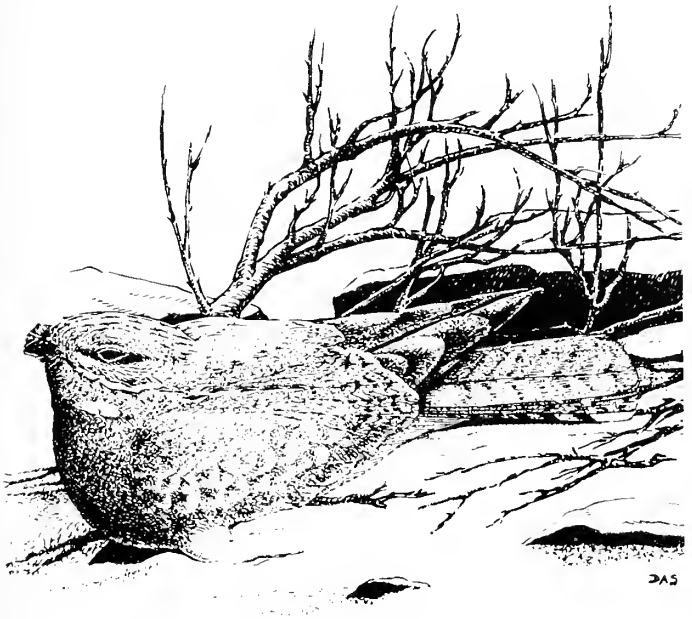
Michael C Jennings, Coordinator Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia, Warners Farm House, Warners Drove, Somersham, Cambridgeshire, PE28 3WD, England.

(Telephone and Fax, 01487 841733; International 00 44 1487 841733. Email: *arabian.birds@dial.pipex.com*)

CD - *A Sound Guide to Nightjars and Related Nightbirds* by Richard Ranft and Nigel Cleere (1998)

This CD brings together the voices of 107 species of *Caprimulgiformes*, some published for the first time. Only 12 species are missing from the world total due to the unavailability of suitable recordings. As a collection of the songs, calls and others sounds of these birds this CD is unsurpassed. There is probably also no other CD of any description with more weird sounds per minute than this one. Some species are so remarkably unusual that they are lovely to listen too. Each recording varies in length from about ten seconds with just a few clicks to nearly 2 minutes although most are probably about 30-40 seconds. All five of the species that occur in Arabia (three breed - so far) are included but is also a useful resource with which to brush up on the many more from nearby in Africa and India - just in case! This CD is designed to complement the book *Nightjars : A Guide to Nightjars and related Nightbirds* by Nigel Cleere. There is no announcement or voiceover for each species but they can all be easily identified and located by the track search facility on your CD player or PC.

Published by Pica Press, The Banks, Mountfield, Nr Robertsbridge, East Sussex TN32 5JY.
Price £14.99.



Calls of the Nubian nightjar *Caprimulgus nubicus* and all other Arabian nightjars can be found on the above CD.

Flora of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Illustrated - Vol 2 (part 3) by Shaukat Ali Chaudhary (2000)

This illustrated flora is being issued in three volumes although Vol 2 is split into three parts. Vol 1 which covered Pteridophyta, Gymnosperms and 55 families from *Amonaceae* to *Mimosaceae* has already been published. Vol 2 Parts 1&2, which deal with 43 families (*Fabaceae* to *Orobanchaceae*) and Vol 3 (Monocot families) are yet to be published. This part 3 of Vol 2 covers nine families from *Acanthaceae* to *Compositae*. Each family had a paragraph of introduction describing the general characteristics of the family, mode of growth, leaves, flowers, fruit and seeds. There is an indication of the number of genera and species worldwide . This is followed by a key to genera, this breaks down later in the text to keys to species. The characteristics of each genera are given as for the family. For each species there are details of the author, references and synonyms with the Arabic name and a transliteration to English. A description of the plant then follows, with the details of localities where it has been found in Saudi Arabia and the world distribution. Illustrated with 132 plates of line drawings, many of which illustrate three or four species.

Published by the Ministry of Agriculture and Water National Herbarium National Agriculture and Water Research Center Riyadh P O Box 17285 Riyadh 11484 Saudi Arabia.

Birds of Abu Dhabi - Checklist by Simon Aspinall (2001)

This booklet is a guide for both residents and visitors to Abu Dhabi. It provides an up to date list of the almost 400 species that have been recorded within the Emirate of Abu Dhabi (the largest Emirate in the UAE), of which 325 have been seen in the environs of Abu Dhabi city, situated on Abu Dhabi island. Considering the island is only 17 km long it is quite a remarkable total as the UAE list has only some 420 birds on it. 30 species breed on the island. The large Abu Dhabi list reflects to some extend a local concentration of active birders and a surprisingly diverse habitat range within the Emirate, not to mention the numerous manmade sites such as the Al Wathba lake, the fabled camel race track fodder fields and numerous parks and gardens. An appendix lists those escapes and releases which have been recorded regularly but are not likely to breed - those escapes that are already naturalised are included on the main list. The list is a simple one of English and scientific names with a status code. The booklet also includes a site plan of Abu Dhabi island to show the main bird sites and an has an Arabic introduction. Complete with 14 colour photos by Hanne and Jens Eriksen.

Card covers, 23 pages A5 size. Sponsored by BP and published in association with ERWDA Abu Dhabi. Available from Peter Hellyer and Simon Aspinall, P O Box 45553, Abu Dhabi, UAE; price UAE Dh 15 or from Simon Aspinall at 7 Dussindale Drive, Norwich, NR7 OTZ, UK, price £3.50. (Both prices include post and packing). Copies may also be ordered by email from <emiratesbirds@hotmail.com>.

ABBA and *Phoenix* Notes and Notices

Contributions to *Phoenix*

Articles relevant to the aims of the ABBA project are welcomed, especially notes on new breeding birds, the avifauna of specific areas or studies concerning particular species. There is no charge for notices, requests for information and advertisements of reports, publications etc. Articles may be emailed, submitted on disk (please state software) typed or handwritten. Charges for commercial advertisements and loose inserts are available on request.

Records still needed

Readers who have records of Arabian birds, however old, and

whether published or not, are urged to make contact with the Co-ordinator. Old records are especially valuable in assessing population changes and range expansions and contractions. For example, were there house sparrows *Passer domesticus* in Abu Dhabi in 1960? No one seems to know for sure. Although the project concerns resident and breeding species, it is not only proved breeding information that is required, notes suggesting possible or probable breeding, particularly uncommon breeding species are also very valuable. Information on exotics and escaped species, ringed birds and habitats is also needed. There is still much scope for collecting breeding bird information even for the common species in well trodden areas. Would observers please continue to send in records and information for their local area and remember to copy ABBA report sheets to the local bird recorder (if there is one). Any outstanding report sheets for 2001 or earlier years should be sent in as soon as possible. All potential contributors will be sent full instructions on how to submit records, ABBA recording forms, breeding birds list etc.

How to obtain *Phoenix*

One issue of *Phoenix* is published each year. It is issued free to all current contributors to the ABBA project and is sent to recent correspondents. A bundle of each issue is also passed to all natural history and similar groups active in Arabia. It is available on subscription for a single payment of £20 (€33) for the next five issues, i.e. Nos 19 to 23 inclusive. Because of the excessive bank charges for handling foreign cheques those not having access to a UK bank account are asked to pay in Sterling or Euro (€) banknotes or the equivalent in foreign currency notes. *Phoenix* Nos 1-17 are available at £2/€4 each (or the whole set for £25/€40) including postage. Those leaving Arabia might be interested in placing a subscription order as the price represents a small sum for all the news of Arabian birds for five years. All subscribers will receive a reminder when their next subscription is due. Will subscribers and observers please remember to advise any change of address.

Recent Reports

The following are a selection of some interesting, unexpected or unusual records of Arabian breeding birds (or potential breeders) received during the last year. Records are from 2001 unless shown otherwise. Not all these records have been verified and some may not yet be accepted by local recorders.

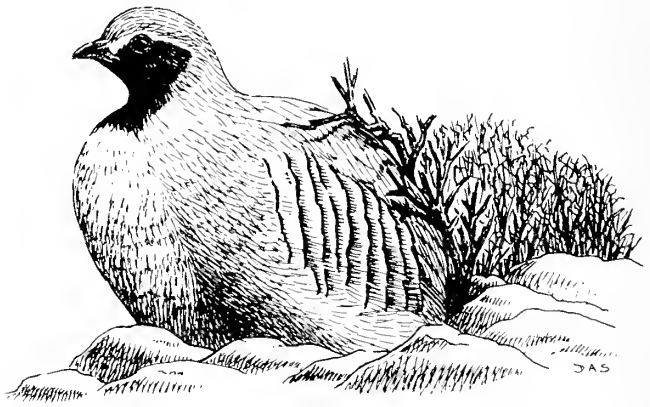
Great crested grebe ***Podiceps cristatus.*** Eggs in April at a nest near Dhahran (QA29), by early July the young were full grown and the female was back on the nest apparently with eggs again; (P Koken, Richard Wellington). At the same site on 5 July Ian Philip saw a pair with four young, small enough to be carried on the back of the adults. Double brooding is uncommon for this species and is usually from a new nest site. Possibly the lack of suitable nest sites at the location meant there was little alternative but for the pair to use the same nest again.

Night heron ***Nycticorax nycticorax.*** At dusk 14 flew into the effluent lagoons at Dhahran (QA29) on 31 May . The lateness of the record suggest breeding locally as does three pairs of juveniles wings (victims of shooters) found at the site in the following week (Ian Phillip).

Cattle egret ***Bubulcus ibis.*** Up to 20 all summer in the Dubai area (VA27) is an unprecedented number (Colin Richardson). Do they breed locally?

Bearded vulture ***Gypaetus barbatus.*** One seen twice in June 2000 at Jebal Sawdah, (IA13) Asir, (*Jeddah Ornithological Group Newsletter,* July 2000). This appears to be the only record from south west Saudi Arabian in recent years.

Lappet-faced vulture ***Torgos tracheliotus.*** On 6 July, 22 or possibly more, at a camel carcass, Al Kamil (ZA21) Oman, (Dave Sargeant/*Oman Birder).*



Philby's partridge ***Alectoris philbyi.*** Good views at close range of bird at Dhahran (QA29) 16 August (Graham Lobley). Doubtless an escape.

Bridled tern ***Sterna anaethetus.*** Half a million pairs breeding on the Yemen Thu erab and Murain islands, May (Omar Al Saghier). Further details awaited.

Little tern ***Sterna albifrons.*** About 30 pairs at a suspected breeding site at an effluent lagoon near Dhahran (QA29) 6 July (Ian Philip).

Palm dove ***Streptopelia senegalensis.*** Nest with three young near Muscat (YB24) 31 May (Dave Sargeant/*Oman Birder*).

Rose-ringed parakeet ***Psittacula krameri.*** Two young fell from a date palm nest in Dhahran (QA29) in April. Nest thought to be in a crevice in the top of the tree (Richard Wellington).

Barn owl ***Tyto alba.*** One flushed from an old hamerkop *Scopus umbretta* nest, south west Saudi Arabia (IB11) April (Peter Castell and Bernard Pleasance).

Indian roller ***Coracias benghalensis.*** More than 300 at Sohar Sun Farms (WB25) 17 August (Alan Pimbley/*Oman Birder*).

Hoopoe ***Upupa epops.*** Nesting in a rolled up carpet at NWRC Taif (GB19) in April (Bernard Pleasance and Peter Castell).

Bluethroat ***Luscinia svecica.*** Three males singing at an effluent lagoon Dhahran (QA29) on 23 March (Ian Phillip). Nearest breeding is eastern Turkey and Iran.

White-cheeked bulbul ***Pycnonotus leucogenys.*** Eggs predated by brown rat Muscat (YB24) (David Sargeant/*Oman Birder*).

House crow *Corvus splendens*. One Thumrait (UA12) 8-12 October 2000 (*Oman Birder*).

Rose-coloured starling *Sturnus roseus*. One Wafra (NB34) oilfield Kuwait 5 June. An unusual southern record during the breeding season. (Mark Chichester).

Trumpeter finch *Bucanetes githagineus*. One 16 June at Wafra oilfield (NB34) Kuwait, an unusual record for midsummer (Mark Chichester).

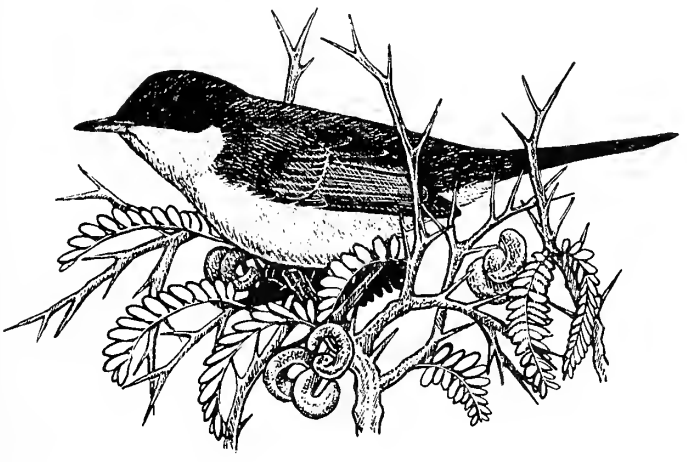
Sites of Interest:

This column aims to provide details of the variety and diversity of bird habitats throughout Arabia and the representative birds to be found in each. The series of site reports appearing in the issues of *Phoenix* are not meant to be a "where to watch birds in Arabia" or a directory to the most prolific bird sites, although a number of them are exceptionally good bird areas.

Observers are invited to write up other sites, especially those that they have studied reasonably well, drawing special attention to the breeding and resident species that occur. A site may be as small as a sewage pond or similar microsite, an urban area or as large as a whole mountain range.

Dracaena terraces of Jebel Samhan, Oman

The exeellent bird sites guide to Oman (Page 10) could not reasonably cover all the places in Oman that are good for birds; at some site birds are just not numerous enough to warrant a visit during a time limited trip and others are just too remote and difficult to get to. In the latter category is Jebel Samhan (UB11 - VA12) the eastern mountain range in Dhofar that rises to over 1800 m and is rarely visited on account of its difficult terrain and lack of tracks. The jebel is for the most part a plateau presenting a south facing stepped escarpment over 1 km high for almost its entire length from north of Mirbat to the coast opposite the Hallaniyat islands (Kuria Murias) some 80 km to the east. One particularly difficult and remote part of that mountain range is the south west face (UB11) of the escarpment which lies some 15-18 km NE of Mirbat.



The near endemic Arabian warbler *Sylvia leucomelaena* was one of the commoner birds in the scrub below the southern escarpment of Jebel Samhan.

A camp site I had during ABBA Survey 27 in March 2000 was on the lip of the Jebel Samhan escarpment directly north of Mirbat and I was intrigued to see in the distance through my telescope that a series of terraces fell away from the escarpment and that on the higher terraces there were many large dracaena *Dracaena serrulata* trees. This was a habitat I had not seen anywhere in Oman before although there are a few small dracaena trees beside the road on Jebel Qamar, which are now much eaten by camels. I resolved to visit this new dracaena site on a future trip. The opportunity came in November 2001 (ABBA Survey 29). I camped with my partner Carol Qirreh in a wadi below the escarpment at 220m on 26 November and we decided to climb up to the upper terraces the next day. We left the camp site at 0630 hrs. At first one walks up a gentle wadi which is flanked on the west side by a large outcrop of sandstone, unique amongst the limestone generality of Oman. (The Mirbat area is interesting geologically as there are also granite outcrops nearby). In the wadi there was much acacia and a few stunted tamarisk. I was surprised to find in the wadi bed many dry specimens of the curious plant *Hydnora africana*. It looks like a fungus but is actually a root parasite of acacia and lacks leaves and roots. On another trip to the Tihama of Saudi Arabia a botanist I was with got quite excited about finding just one *hydnora* but here there were groups of 20 together. We clambered up a spur of the escarpment, climbing through a largely ungrazed hillside covered in trees and bushes of acacia, *Comifera*, frankinsense *Lyciuu*, *Adenium* and several other species. There were lots of *Caralluma*. The first dracaena trees appeared about 600m at which level many rocks were covered in lichens and hairlike lichen hung on the trees and bushes. Most dracaena are found at 900-1100 m. At 1000m there was a terrace some 100m wide and 300 long where there were many dracaena and other trees and enough soil for termites hills. The highest point that can be reached from the south is about 1150 m which I reached at 10.45hrs. From that point a sheer cliff rises to the escarpment lip at about 1450 m). It was a hot, arduous climb with only a little relief from a breeze on the spur crest but the climb up and down in one day is possible even for the not especially fit like us. We got back to our camp site at 1615 hrs. There were no stock animals seen at all on the slopes but our visit was during Ramadan and probably animals are not pastured here during that month. I had seen cows on the higher slopes in March 2000 and there was plenty of evidence of cows and donkeys at 1000m. We both picked up ticks and saw several others which is a good indication of the presence of stock animals. It could be that these slopes are reserved for grazing in the spring time. One particularly encouraging point about this site was that there were a number of small young dracaena which is something you do not generally see at other dracaena sites in Arabia. Not one was found on Socotra (Page 17).

Birds we found on our short visit were probably only a small part of those that breed here during the monsoon period and this very undisturbed area warrants a much more thorough examination as it must attract a number of interesting species. Fan-tailed raven *Corvus rhipidurus*, Tristram's grackle *Onychognathus tristramii* and Arabian red-legged partridge *Alectoris melanocephala* could be seen or heard most of the time during the ascent, other common birds present were yellow-vented bulbul *Pycnonotus xanthopygos* and south Arabian mourning wheatear *Oenanthe lugentoides*. There were also a few palm dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*, desert *lark Ammomanes deserti*, pale crag martin *Ptyonoprogne fuligula*, rock dove *Columba livia*, white breasted white eye *Zosterops abyssinica* and shining sunbird *Nectarinia*

habessinica. Cinnamon-breasted rock bunting *Emberiza tahapisi* were strangely absent on the slopes but they are present on the top of the escarpment. Paradise flycatchers *Terpsiphone viridis* were found in the bushes of the spur and the odd wintering desert wheatear *Oenanthe deserti* was present all the way up the hill. Raptors were very much in evidence during our visit and there were not many occasions when there was not a raptor of some description to be seen overhead. There were resident pairs of kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* and Barbary falcon *F. pelegrinoides*, also long-legged buzzard *Buteo rufinus* and short-toed eagle *Circaetus gallicus* were seen and both could be resident. A single Verreaux's eagle *Aquila verreauxii* passed along the escarpment (a probable was also seen there in March 2000). A roost of some 25 Egyptian vultures *Neophron percnopterus* assembled each night on the top of the escarpment. Visiting raptors included several steppe *A. nipalensis* and imperial eagles *A. heliaca*. A Hume's owl *Strix butleri* was heard calling at 0600 hours on 28 November from slopes we had climbed. Birds seen in the wadi bottoms but not on the slopes were blackstart *Cercomela melanura*, Lichtenstein's sandgrouse *Pterocles lichtensteinii*, Arabian warbler *Sylvia leucomelaena* and long-billed pipit *Anthus similis*.

Hyrax are present on the hillside (the classic prey of Verreaux's eagle) and at 1000m there were several diggings with dung beetle larvae balls cracked open, indicating the presence of honey badger. Wolves were heard howling heartily on two nights.

Michael Jennings

Journals, Reports and Other Publications

The following notes list some of the papers concerning birds and other wildlife which have appeared in the various Arabian natural history society newsletters and in other reports etc., in recent months. Space does not permit the full citation of each article but further information can be obtained from the various societies and organisations shown. Note that in addition to the main papers listed most periodicals also include regular features such as recent reports, brief notes etc.

Annual Report 2000 of the Bird Monitoring and Protection Society (Kuwait)

This first annual report of BMAPS is remarkable from the point of view that the group was only created near the end of 2000 and is in great part due to the hard work put into the new group by its Secretary George Gregory. It is to be hoped that the momentum started in this first report will continue to drive the group forward in future years. The first publication of BMAPS includes a membership and contacts list, notes on the need for bird monitoring and protection in Kuwait and a good Kuwait bird list. This has been recently updated following the critical review of all Kuwait records which has discarded many that have not been substantiated. The list is broken down into the commoner species (those that have occurred more than ten times) showing their status and abundance and the rarer birds of Kuwait. These latter species have been recorded less than ten times. A separate article provides details of selected records for the year 2000, including exciting news about new breeding species, and rarities such as white pelican, marbled teal and griffon vulture. The report finishes with a listing of papers published during the year relevant to Kuwait birds. A useful format report to look forward to each year.

Available from: George Gregory, KES, P O Box 8640, Salmiya 22057, Kuwait, (Email: ggoldie51@hotmail.com).

Monthly bird report – United Arab Emirates

Those with a very long memory will recall that back in the 80's a very handy monthly report of UAE birds became available, reproduced in hard copy and sent out through ye olde snail mail. That organ of Colin Richardson grew into the highly respected Emirates Bird Report which Colin produced with others. Delays in production of the EBR has meant there is still a need for a monthly report of UAE birds and so Colin has started to produce this series, of monthly reports. This first issue covers March 2001 when a staggering 253 species were recorded. The report is a species list of all birds seen, how many and where, their status, dates and observers. Essential reading for those birding in the Gulf or thinking of going on a trip there. Monthly reports to October have appeared up until going to press.

Details from Colin Richardson at P O Box 50394, Dubai, UAE, (Email: colinr@emirates.net.ae; website: www.birding-arabia.com).

Zoology in the Middle East (ISSN 0939-7140)

There were three issues in 2001. Vol 22 holds 17 papers seven of which concern vertebrates. The two bird papers cover the breeding bird communities of Wadi Al Kharrar in the Jordan Valley and a population study of houbara bustard in the Middle East using DNA analysis techniques. In the Jordan valley there are at least six species regularly breeding that are hardly known in the Arabian peninsula. The bustards study shows that there is very little or no isolation of *macqueenii* populations however the study highlights the difference between the *undulata* and *macqueenii* subspecies. Vol 23 has 16 articles, eight on vertibrates but none on birds. Of Arabian interest is the distribution and status of the Arabian Tahr in the UAE and northern Oman. It is possibly on the verge of extinction in the UAE. Vol 24 is a special issue on marine turtles in the Eastern Mediterranean. The 15 papers in this issues give an insight to the population, status, biology and ecology of the two highly threatened turtles (loggerhead and green) that regularly breed in the Eastern Mediterranean. The leatherback also occurs rarely. Turtle breeding grounds are under much pressure from a number of human needs, especially the tourist industry which also likes sandy beaches. In this region turtles are regularly caught in the trawl nets of fishermen, they are vulnerable to pollution and there is still a market for turtle flesh in Alexandria, Egypt, despite them being a protected species there.

Available from Kasparek Verlag Monchhofstr. 16, 69120 Heidelberg, Germany. (Email: Kasparek@t-online.de).

Arabian Wildlife

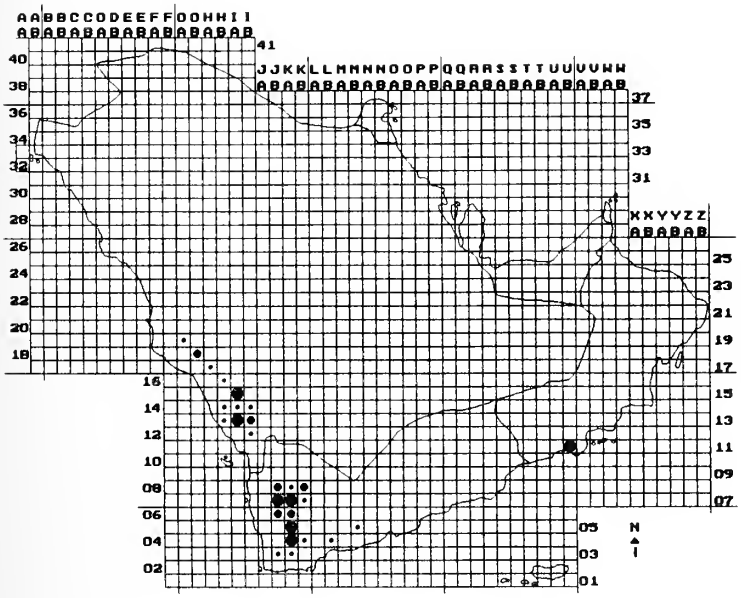
Issue 10 Spring 2001 continues the tradition of pages and pages of marvellous photography. No 10 has something for everyone, waders around Arabia (part 2 appears in Issue 11) , turtles and terrapins, marine life, mammals (foxes, bats and dormice), the Hawar islands, corals and conservation. No 11 Summer 2001 is just as varied in its coverage with articles on sailfish tagging around Arabia, Humpback whale research in Oman, Dhub lizards, animal migration, illegal wildlife trade, radio tracking wildcats, zoo vets in Yemen, mangrove habitat and wildlife, more turtles, jerboas, spiders, work on freezing embryos and sperm for endangered wildlife research, and the henna plant. Both 48 pages (including adverts). Price UK£3/Dh10 per issue. Subscription enquiries to *www.arabianwildlife.com/snbscribe* or *www.tridentpress.com.*

Available from: Trident Press Ltd, 2-5 Old Bond Street, Mayfair, London WIX 3TB UK.

Tribulus, Bulletin of the Emirates Natural History Group (ISSN 1019-6019)

Vol 10.2 (Autumn/Winter 2000) contained a number of articles of interest. The most relevant to ABBA is a paper on the breeding of the golden eagle south of the Liwa in the UAE. Other submissions cover spiny tailed lizard, tree hunting snakes, mud creepers, recent whale records from the UAE, a checklist of grasshoppers and an archaeological roundup, as well as various reviews and miscellaneous items. This issue also contains an index to Vols. 6-10. Vol 11.1 (Spring/Summer 2001) mainly concerns archaeological research and historical aspects of the Emirates. There is one biological contribution on damselflies.

Available from Emirates Natural History Group (Abu Dhabi), P O Box 23980, Abu Dhabi, UAE.



The discovery of the Yemen serin *Serinus menachensis* breeding in Dhofar means a considerable range extension. An article in *Oman Bird News* No 22 describes this first nesting.

Oman Bird News 22 (Summer 2001)

The reappearance of *Oman Bird News* after a gap of three years (No 21 was for Winter 97/8) is most welcome. This issue has lots of interesting stuff including a detailed note of the first record and breeding of Yemen serin in Oman at the Tawi Atair sinkhole in Dhofar. Illustrated with photos this discovery must rank among the most amazing finds in Arabia during the 1990s. Another important article concerns the strange death of 55 brown-necked ravens and five palm doves at the Jaaluni reserve centre in autumn 1997. Other notes concern little owls, Winter waterfowl counts (1998 & 99), ringing recoveries, rare bird reports roundup, nomenclature changes relevant to the Oman Bird Record, birding reminiscences from the early 1970s and notes and news. Several good colour photos. This edition includes an index for all issues from 1-22. Edited by an Harrison (Email: *ianmair@omantel.net.om*).

Published by and available from the Oman Bird Records Committee, PO Box 246, Muscat PC 113, Sultanate of Oman. (Previous issues were priced at £3, US$5 or ORs 2).

The Osprey: No. 1 (2001)

This new journal is the joint publication of the three British Armed Forces bird watching and ornithological groups (Royal Navy Birdwatching Society, Army Ornithological Society and the RAF Ornithological Society) and represents a remarkably fresh and colourful change from the sometimes lack lustre publications of the individual societies previously. These were *Sea Swallow*, *The Adjutant* and the *RAFOS Journal*. The three separate societies still exist but have chosen to come together to produce a journal together achieving an improvement in quality through economies of scale. All these societies have regularly in the past published material on the Middle East in general and Arabia in particular. This first issue does not unfortunately have anything on Arabia but there are likely to be Arabian papers in future. Osprey No 1 contains a range of articles from all round the globe including Africa, Cyprus and the Indian Ocean. Many colour photos. A4 size magazine format, 46 pages. Details available from the individual societies mentioned.

ABBA Website

Apologies that the ABBA website <*http://dspace.dial.pipex.com/arabian.birds/*> has not been updated for quite some time and remains quaintly basic - no one took up the request for help in a previous issue. New software might produce improvements in 2002. However the following subjects are currently available.

- List of Arabian breeding birds (with ABBA reporting codes) and short notes on status and distribution.
- Draft bibliography of Arabian birds.
- Index to the contents of *Phoenix* newsletters, numbers 1-15.
- *Phoenix* subscriptions and back issues, ABBA reports and other items available for sale.

It is hoped to add *Instructions to contributors to the ABBA project*, report forms and a list of ornithological and natural history societies in Arabia, their publications, officers and national bird recorders.

Turkey Bird Report 1997-2001

OSME have made the following announcement:

Preparations are being made for the compilation of the ninth *Turkey Bird Report*, which will cover the period 1997-2001. For the first time, it is envisaged that the report will be the production of a joint Anglo-Turkish team, namely Metehan Özen, Bahtiyar Kurt, Rod Martins and myself. Given the new structure we aim to produce the report, which will be, as usual, published in *Sandgrouse*, much swifter than has been the norm, with publication hopefully in spring 2003. Many records have already been received by both OSME and DHKD, and there is no need for these to be sent again. However, we do urge any observers with unpublished records, or those previously unsubmitted to either body to contact any member of the editorial team (preferably either via the address above or *turkishbirdreport@osme.org*). You may also submit records to *Turkey Bird Report*, OSME, The Lodge, Sandy, Beds SG19 2DL, UK. It would be helpful if observers were able to consult the most recent report, covering 1992-96 (*Sandgrouse* 22: 13-35) wherein details of those species for which records are particularly sought can be found. Simple trip reports are nonetheless welcome. Anyone requiring further details is welcome to contact me at the address above.

Guy Kirwan, Turkey Bird Report editorial team

Common Mynahs Harassing nesting birds

The common mynah *Acridotheres tristis* is well known as a tame, bold bird that is often aggressive to others of its species, especially when nesting or when disputing nesting crevices. In the Indian regions is has also been known to fight with other species such as parakeets and barbets for suitable nesting crevices. Two incidents described below of aggression towards other nesting species have been reported recently from Arabia.

Rita L Nep of Dhahran (QA29) has reported details of a feral rock pigeons *Columba livia* nesting on a window ledge being harassed by common mynahs. The mynahs, which were also nesting under the lights in the same building, apparently directed aggressive behaviour towards the pigeons over the entire nesting cycle from nest building until fledging during (April and May 2001). One or both mynahs would approach and disturb the pigeons at their nest over much of the day but particularly in the mornings. Sometimes these aggressive visits lasted for more than an hour. When the nest was unguarded one of the mynahs rolled an egg out of the nest and then the pair attacked and broke it, leaving the well developed embryo but flying off with the shell. The remaining egg hatched but on occasions the mynahs were seen to attack the squab whilst it was alone in the nest. However it did eventually fledge successfully.

Very often the attack consisted of an approach to the incubating pigeon pecking it on the head and body. Sometimes the pigeon would respond by running at the mynah to displace it but it would often quickly return to renew the harassment. At another pigeon nest nearby a mynah approached within 1.3m of an incubating feral pigeon and when it started to walk closer the pigeon became agitated and at one metre distance it puffed out its feathers in aggression. The mynah stopped and after a couple of seconds flew off as the pigeon settled down again.

In Dubai (VA27) another incident was noted where two mynahs, presumably a pair, were seen to harass a hoopoe rearing young in a roof crevice. The mynahs may have been nesting in a nearby tree. Over a period of two weeks in the middle of May 2001 when there were young in the nest the mynahs were continually harassing the hoopoe and trying to get into the nest. They may have got into the nest and attacked the nestlings as only one young appears to have fledged. (In 2000 an unmolested pair of hoopoes raised five young in a large tree in the garden of house next door).

The hoopoe became very careful about going to the nest whilst the mynahs were around and would sit for a long time watching the mynahs. The mynahs may have been interested in the nest space but there seems to be a strong hint of malevolence in their attitude to the hoopoes.

Many thanks to Richard Wellington, Rita Nep and Marijcke Jongbloed for their correspondence on these events and Marijcke's note in *Gazelle* 16(5):3, 2001.

During 2001 brown woodland warbler *Phylloscopus umbrovirens* were found nesting earlier in the year than was previously known. (Page 6)

ABBA Survey 28: Socotra, December 2000

I have had plans to visit Socotra right from the beginning of the ABBA project but for various reasons these plans never came to fruition until December 2000. By this time the island was actually quite well known ornithologically but anyone interested in Arabian birds has got to go there and this was my opportunity.

I arrived on the island on 8 December with my partner Carol Qirreh. Our simple plan was to spend three weeks on the island and see as many different habitats as possible. It is quite possible now to see much of the island by vehicle but we chose to use the traditional mode of expedition transport on the island - camels. We spend the first night with a family in Hadibu, the capital, and were able to load the camels and leave the next day.

The majority of the island is broken limestone hills rising to about 1000 m over much of the island. The hills are extremely broken making it very difficult in many places to get around except on foot. There are three other notable topographical features which in effect dictate the itinerary. The centre of the island is a granite range known as the Haggiers rising out of the limestone to a height of just over 1500 m. There is an unbroken escarpment approx 500 m high running for some 70km parallel to the south coast and thirdly between this escarpment and the southern coast there is a long wide sandy plain known as Nowged.

We camped each night and our two camels, which came with their drivers, were used to carry our food and camp equipment. Our itinerary took us out of the back of Hadibu to climb up the Wadi Qishin to the plateau at 1000m, this was the highest point we reached. From there we moved down the Wadi di Aseroh to the Nowged plain. We passed west along the Nowged for some 35km, ascended the escarpment at Siberoh and then headed across broken limestone plateau directly north to reach the north coast west of Diham. After this we visited the north coast and Wadi Ayhaft area arriving back in Hadibu on the afternoon of 24 December. Based in Hadibu during the last few days we were able to take 4WD taxis out on three days. We went to Galancia in the extreme west of the island (another small outcrop of granite there), the Momi peninsula or eastern cape and the Dixem plateau in the centre. We also visited several places on the north coast and near to Hadibu.

The north facing hills near Hadibu were extremely green with a lush herb layer. In early December there was a flush of flowers from recent rains. The northern ascent and the plateau were likewise very green and fresh with deep wet grass on much of the plateau area which had in places a dense covering of small bushes and larger fig trees as well as a few of the Socotra speciality *Dracaena cinnabari*. The south slope was noticeably drier and hotter especially as one neared the coast. Whereas we had found green herbs and flowers at the base of the hills on the north face only just above sea level there were nothing but dry scrub on the south slope. The southern slope had many examples of the plants distinctive of Socotra such as bottle trees *Adenium obesum*, cucumber trees *Dendrosicyos socotrana* and others. We found water everywhere in the hills and the wadi ran almost to the coastal plain on the south. However Nowged was completely waterless and although bushes were green in places it was generally dry halophytic scrub or thorn bush with, here and there, small patches of palm groves. The escarpment track up from Siberoh had a surprising range of vegetation from sea level to the summit at 500m where there were lots of bottle trees. The interior plateau was however quite different to the transect south from Hadibu over the mountains. Here it was open and windswept with a layer of low scrub and some grassy areas but much exposed rock and limestone pavements. Most of the central depression and the northern half of this transect across the centre was covered in the small endemic bush *Croton socotranus* which was very tedious and not very good for birds. The north coast was mainly sandy and dry with thickets of saltbush. Wadi Ayhaft is a richly vegetated wadi with many tall fig trees, a wide variety of other tree species, many endemic plants and shrubs and much running water. The excursions to Dixem revealed the best forests of *dracaena* on the island. Worryingly not a single young plant of this dramatic tree was seen during the entire trip. The Momi peninsula is very broken and rocky with much dry grasslands and much grazed.

The climate was hot but not exceptionally so and the highlands were cool. We seem to have been fortunate with the weather as we had only one day when the winds were a particular problem and contrary to most advice we had received of likely bad weather, there was only one day with rain for most of the afternoon.

Socotra is well known as a centre of endemism. There are over 270 endemic plants on the island and, depending on your taxonomic viewpoint, 6-8 endemic birds. There are also three other species that occur on the island that are not found elsewhere in Arabia. It is fair to warn those thinking of visiting Socotra that, apart from the endemics and specialities the island is not a birding hotspot in terms of the number of species likely to be seen. This is on account of its lack of good wetlands (both inland or on the coast), its geographical position is set someway off the main flow of the African/Eurasian migration route and it is isolated from both Arabia and Africa and lacks many common birds found there. At the time of our visit the Socotra list had only 174 species on it. We were not particularly looking for migrants or sea/shorebirds and in three weeks we saw only 75 species, including only 25 passerines. A selection of the birds seen is shown below.

Socotra cormorant *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis*. Present in small numbers offshore on the northern coast (up to ten together), near Hadibu, Galancia and Qadub.

Intermediate heron *Egretta intermedia*. One Qadub 24 December. Seen well, the neck was long but not angular like great white egret *Egretta alba* also yellow bill, gape did no extend beyond eye. Larger than reef heron *Egretta gularis*. Apparently the first record for the island.

Tufted duck *Aythya fuligula*. One male Erhina lagoons near Hadibu, 27 & 28 December. Apparently the first record for the island.

Egyptian vulture *Neophron percnopterus*. Very common everywhere on the island from sea level to 1000m, especially around human settlements. Often 20 together and 40 together once or twice. On 26 December a count from a hotel roof in Hadibu (360 degrees sweep) found 111 birds sitting on buildings or telephone poles. If allowance is made for those on the ground or unseen there were possibly 200 or more in the town at that time. Courtship was observed (copulation) but no other evidence of breeding was obtained.

Socotra buzzard *Buteo socotrae.* Quite common in the hills and rocky plateau areas. Seen on 13 days. Six together in Wadi Ayhaft (included juveniles). Pairs seen on occasions and visiting sites where possibly nesting.

Little crake *Porzana parva.* One probable in a rushy wadi on Dixem plateau 27 December. This small crake was flushed from underfoot, it had long dangling legs in flight, appeared generally pale brown below and brown on the back without prominent markings. Bill prominent and not stubby. Only seen in flight and not flushed again. There are no previous records of small crakes from the island.

Cream-coloured courser *Cursorius cursor.* Four seen on Nowged plain including display and flight calling, also 1-3 at three sites on north coast.

Sooty gull *Larus hemprichii.* Common on the northern coast at Hadibu, Diham, Galancia, Qadub. Fifty at Qadub, 24 December. No behaviour indicative of breeding.

White-browed coucal *Centropus superciliosus.* Three or four calling at Firishi (1000 m) early morning from 3.30 am (one and a half hours before sunrise) and again just before sunset, 10-12 December. Also calling at a date grove south of Hadibu, 26 December.

Socotra scops owl *Otus* sp. Heard calling at Denegen (in Wadi Qishin), Firishi (1000 m), Firiji, Steroh, Siberoh, and at three places in W. Ayhaft. Two or three calling simultaneously at Denegen, Firiji, W. Ayhaft. Call sounded like 'wup - - wup-wakurrr'.

Forbes-Watson's swift *Apus berliozi.* About six near Hayf on Nowged plain on 14 December, 20 at 700 m on escarpment north of Siberoh and 50 more on plateau, 18 December, individuals and pairs over *Croton* scrub and over open water cisterns north of Bakairjit, 19 December and 20 high over Wadi Ayhaft 23 December.

Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica.* One in a rushy wadi at Dixem, 27 December.

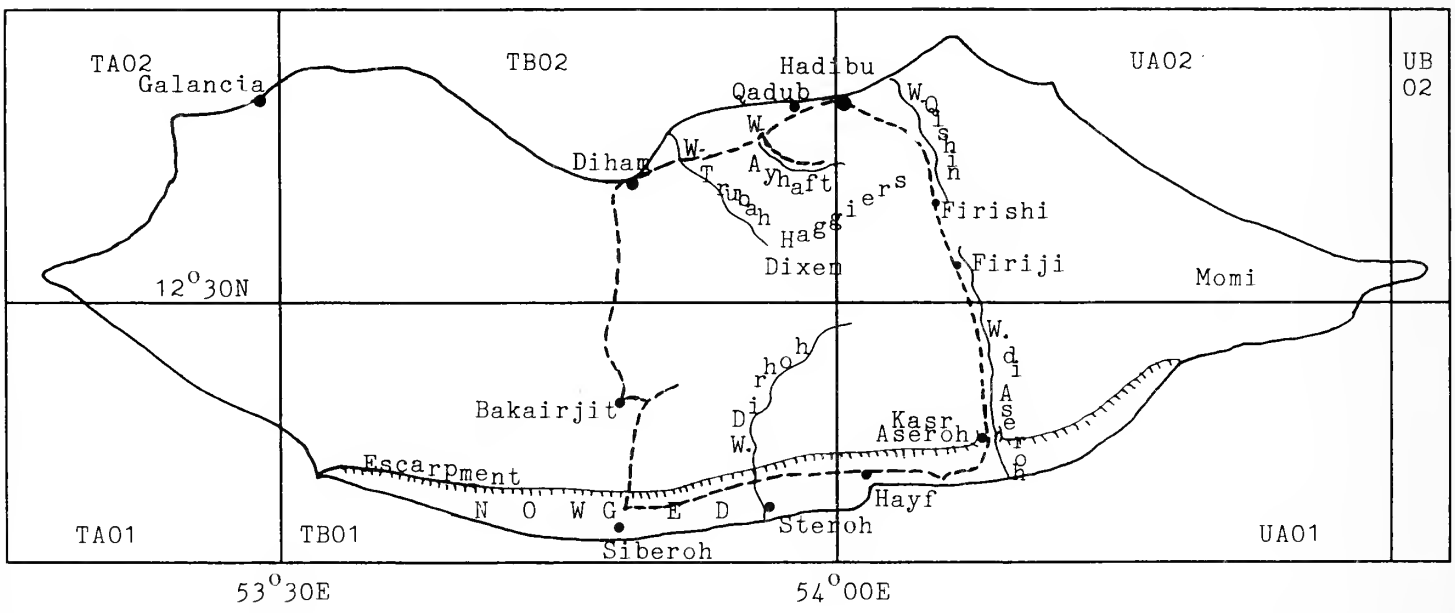
Socotra cisticola *Cisticola haesitatus.* Locally common in low coastal scrub of Nowged plain 14 & 15 December, especially near to the sea. In the central wadi they were found again at Bakairjit where they were common and singing in *Croton* scrub. Also present intermittently in the *Croton* scrub for 5 km north of there. Common coastal salt bush near Diham (5 singing males in 600m of saltbush scrub); nest with eggs there 27 December.

Socotra warbler *Incana incana.* Rather scarce and local. Two between 5-800 m on Wadi Qishn 10 December, three pairs 11 December, in scrubby area at 1000m, two at 800 m Wadi Firiji 12 December, one W. Di Aseroh 150 m 13 December, one Siberoh escarpment 17 December and one at Wadi Trubah (850m) 27 December. Some song but no other evidence of breeding.

Socotra sunbird *Nectarinia balfouri.* Widespread in a variety of habitats and seen almost every day. Present up to 1000m and a few on the Nowged plain and the bare highland plateau but most numerous in well wooded wadis, there were about 20 in Wadi Ayhaft on 23 December. Not seen at all on the Momi peninsula 25 December. Often in pairs and some song but no other evidence of breeding.

House crow *Corvus splendens.* Up to 14 counted in palm trees and by the beach east of Hadibu 25-27 December.

Eurasian starling *Sturnus vulgaris.* Two Hayf with Socotra Starlings 14 December. One previous record.



Camel route shown as a dotted line - other places were visited by 4WD taxi

Socotra starling *Onychognathus frater*. Small numbers particularly in areas of bushes and trees, present at Firishi (1000m) but also on the Nowged plain (near Hayf and Siberoh) where several small groups appeared to be visiting the plain from the escarpment or interior highlands to feed in low scrub areas. Only three seen whilst transecting the island north from Siberoh (all at 700m on 18 Dec) but small groups again in coastal *Croton* scrub west of Diham 22 December. One upper W. Ayhaft 23 December. Not seen Momi peninsula or on the way to Galancia. They were most numerous on the Dixem plateau and W. Dirhoh when probably 50-60 were seen 27 December. Told from next species by more bulky appearance, more sluggish movement preferring to fly short distance often through trees rather than the acrobatic and high flying manner of the other. Tends to hide in dense dracaena and other foliage. Often in pairs. Once one had a stick in its bill as if collecting nesting material. A recently fledged juvenile was being fed by both adults, Wadi Dirhoh 27 December.

Somali starling *Onychognathus blythii*. Common and widespread. Seen every day. Common almost everywhere, feeding in coastal areas, around human settlements, wadis and highland to 1000m, Nowged plain, also Galancia and Momi peninsula. The only place where they appear to be outnumbered by the Socotra starling was on the Dixem plateau. Often in pairs and taking food to young in cliff crevice nests on several occasions. Also fledged young with prominent gape flanges accompanied by adults.

Socotra sparrow *Passer motitensis*. Common and widespread in small groups in most habitats, especially near human settlements but also in wadis and in the highlands at 1000m, Nowged plain, limestone plateau north of Siberoh and at Dixem . Also Galancia and Momi peninsula. The only place they were not seen was north of Bakairjit on 19 December in monotonous *Croton* scrub. Often at presumed breeding colonies of holes in rocks and cliffs but also one took straws to a free standing nest (domed) in the crown of a dense fig tree.

Golden-winged grosbeak *Rhynchostruthus socotranus*. Widespread but rather scarce in bushy areas, particularly *Croton* scrub. Pair and a singleton Denegen, about six pairs and a singleton Wadi Di Aseroh , one Siberoh escarpment, six in a small gorge on the plateau, one Bakairjit, 8-10 at the mouth of Wadi Ayhaft and up to ten each day in Wadi Ayhaft. Song on a number of occasions and juveniles being fed by adults 21 December, Wadi Ayhaft.

Socotra bunting *Emberiza socotrana*. Two singletons at 1000m meadows near Firishi. No evidence of breeding.

Other birds seen which are known to breed on the Socotra mainland, or potentially may breed, were as follows, reef heron, osprey *Pandion haliaetus*, kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*, peregrine *Falco peregrinus*, moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*, black-winged stilt *Himantopus himantopus*, Kentish plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*, Lichtenstein's sandgrouse *Pterocles lichtensteinii*, palm dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*, Bruce's green pigeon *Treron waalia*, black-crowned finch lark *Eremopterix nigriceps*, pale crag martin *Ptyonoprogne fuligula*, long-billed pipit *Anthus similis*, white-breasted white-eye *Zosterops abyssinica*, great grey shrike *Lanius excubitor*, brown-necked raven *Corvus ruficollis*, and cinnamon-breasted rock bunting *Emberiza tahapisi*.

Other wildlife is rather scarce, there are a few bats but no indigenous land mammals. We found evidence of civet cats, which are apparently widespread but secretive and are reputed to have been introduced many years ago. There are endemic reptiles and many endemic invertebrates include a huge purple spider and large centipedes. Herds of diminutive cows are present in most localities except the coast lands, and a few sheep, goats, camels and feral donkeys are present.

We had a great deal of help in setting up this trip. David Stanton's own camel safaris to Socotra were our inspiration and we could not have achieved our goal without his many tips, contacts and advice. Omar Al Saghier and David provided information on sites and getting around the island. We were particularly fortunate in getting contact with Ashtal Travel who were especially helpful in arranging travel facilities for us and providing contacts and help in Sana'a and Socotra.

Michael Jennings

Some tips on those wanting to make a birding trip to Socotra

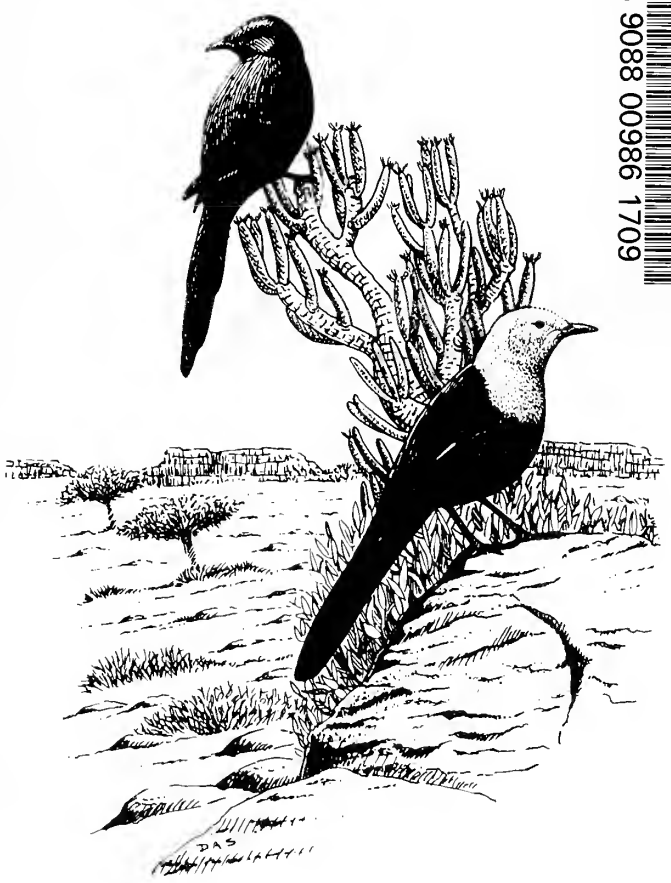
It is quite possible to spend just a week on the island and see all the endemics and Socotra specialties, we had seen them all within the first five days. The best time of year to visit is late November to early March, visits in the summer months can be severely affected by the monsoon (May to October) and the attendant high winds and heavy rainfall. The only flights are with the Yemen national airline Yemenia whose jets fly to Socotra twice each week from Sana'a via Mukulla. Yemenia also have connecting flights from most major cities to Sana'a. Look out for special deals into Sana'a and on to Socotra with Yemenia.

Although we made the arrangements for hotel, camels and taxi hire separately all arrangements can be done through Ashtal Travel in Sana'a who were extremely helpful and understanding of our needs. (Ashtal Travel Company, P O Box 1501, Sana'a Tel 0967 1 266412 Fax 0967 1 244976) . The shorter period you have on the island the more you should leave to them. There are three basic hotels in Hadibu, from which you could base all your activities if you chose not to camp. There are plenty of 4WD taxis but make sure you haggle a price before you start. Whilst we were there is was working out at about US$50 a day but if you agree several days up front you might get it cheaper. If you wish to use camels like we did then realistically a minimum of a week in the field would be needed, this would get you to the south coast and back over the mountains. With two weeks you could have a really good trip over the plateau to Nowged and back from Kasr Aseroh via Dixem and take in Wadis Dirhoh, Trubah and Wadi Ayhaft. Going west on Nowged and back over the drier western highlands as we did, is more of the desert masochists option, needs more time and you could run out of food and possibly water. If you camp, whether with camels or 4WD taxi, you will need to take all camping equipment and supplies with you but at least there is plenty of dead wood for cooking. A tent is useful protection against likely inclement weather and mosquito nets are essential at all seasons as malaria is present. There is plenty of water in the mountains but plan your water needs if spending any time on the Nowged.

Eating out in Hadibu is limited to small basic restaurants. There are very few shops outside Hadibu so all supplies for trips away

need to be bought there. The Al Gazerah Hotel (Tel. Socotra 660445 Fax 660443) was comfortable, it has only one en suite bedroom, but the shared bathroom facilities were more than adequate. There was no food provided by the hotel but an eating area is provided for food brought in from outside. There are two tother older hotels one of which is reported to do meals.

Michael Jennings



One of the commoner birds on Socotra which cannot be seen anywhere else in Arabia is the Somali starling *Onychognathus blythii*.

Oman Bird Calendar - 2002

Fill your year (2002) with 14 magnificent photos of Oman birds by Hanne and Jens Eriksen. Details of price and availability from Hanne and Jens (Email: *jeriksen@squ.edu.om*). Don't miss a month in future - get on their list for the 2003 calendar.

Little Crake - A New Breeding Species for Kuwait

Little crake *Porzana parva* has been a thoroughly under-recorded species in Kuwait, due to lack of coverage or easy access to the edges of reedbeds where the species can be observed. Shortly after my arrival in Kuwait, I started periodically covering a local patch - a long row of reeds, edging into a swampy area of run-off water from a large plant nursery at Sabah Al-Salem (OA35), just south of Kuwait City, and soon started seeing little crakes there.

In 2000 I recorded little crakes there as follows: a female on 19 March, two males and a female on 21 March, three or more on 27 March, a minimum of seven on 30 March and one on 20 April. I did not cover the area so thoroughly during the rest of the year. In 2001 I recorded little crakes there as follows: two males, four females and one not-fully grown juvenile on 16 February, three males and two females on 1 March, one on 16 March and three plus on 29 March. I left Kuwait shortly afterwards. The juvenile on 16 February was definitely associating with the female, whereas all other individuals ever seen there were scattered over the area. It was distinctly smaller than the female, and stood out because it was so pale and buff compared to the female. The eye colour was not noted but there was definitely no red on the bill, and barring was evident both behind and in front of the legs.

Since there is a partial post-juvenile moult of head and body in this species, resulting in adult feathering, from late autumn to winter, any bird in juvenile plumage in mid-February must have hatched very recently, and not the previous year. This, together with it being not full-grown size and the association with the female can only add up to a definite breeding record. Many species in Kuwait breed earlier than in more northerly areas possibly due to the relative mildness of the winters and to avoid the extreme summer heat.

Andrew Bailey and George Gregory have started covering this area thoroughly and regularly from October 2001 onwards, and they have found that little crakes are present there from that time. It is possible that a small population may be there for most of the year and they may even be resident. There are at least six other reedbeds in Kuwait that appear suitable for breeding by this species.

Gavin Rowlands, Revheimsvein, #138, N-4043 Hafrsfjord, Norway, (Email: growlands@stavanger.oilfield.slb.com).

The *Phoenix*

This newsletter is covered by the Biosciences Information Service (BIOSIS) of the Zoological Record. Articles and information in *Phoenix* may be freely reproduced for scientific or non-profit making purposes, provided appropriate acknowledgement is given to authors, the ABBA project and its NCWCD sponsors. Views expressed by authors, including the position of international boundaries on maps or reference to same in the text, do not necessarily reflect those of the Editor or the project sponsors. King Fahd National Library Legal Deposit No 2291/21 on 16/5 1321 H (16/8/2000 AD), ISSN 0268-487X.

Credits

Artwork by David Showler. Maps MCJ. Carol Qirreh gave much help with preparation. Printed by Printroom and Lake Shore Graphics, 12 Northern Court, Vernon Road, Nottingham, NG6 0BJ, UK.

Address

All correspondence for the *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia* project and *Phoenix* should be sent to: Michael C Jennings, ABBA Co-ordinator, Warners Farm House, Warners Drove, Somersham, Cambridgeshire, PE28 3WD, UK. Telephone and Fax, 01487 841733 (International 00 44 1487 841733).
Email: *arabian.birds@dial.pipex.com;* Webpage: *http://dspace.dial.pipex.com/arabian.birds/.*